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author of THE WOMAN OF ROME

ROMAN TALES

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ROMAN TALES

by

ALBERTO MORAVIA

Selected and Translated by

ANGUS DAVIDSON

A SIGNET BOOK

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FOREWORD

"SOME readers of *La Romana*", wrote Moravia in his Preface to *The Woman of Rome*, "may bring forward the objection that a simple and uneducated woman of the people would be incapable of telling her own story in the first person in the correct literary style I have lent her. . . . Two ways were open to me in relating the imaginary autobiography of the character I had chosen to portray—I could either adopt a realistic, photographic, spoken style of language . . . a clumsy, poor dialect, incapable of expressing more than a limited number of feelings and incidents; or I could make my characters speak in my customary style, as I have in all my other books. I chose the second course for two reasons: firstly, I did not see any necessity to change my style because I had changed my characters, and secondly, the language of literature is always truer and more poetically expressive than the spoken language. . . ." These remarks apply equally to the present book, for Moravia's *Roman Tales (Racconti Romani)* consist entirely of short stories related, in the first person, by men of the Roman working class.

I have been guided in my selection not only by personal preference, but also by the question of suitability for the English reader. Some of the stories in the Italian collection are so very Roman in character—so dependent on allusions to places or events of local interest—that it would be impossible to retain their full flavour in translation, or to make them easily intelligible to the majority of English readers.

ANGUS DAVIDSON.

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THE FANATIC

ONE morning in July I was dozing in the Piazza Melozzo da Forlì, in the shade of the eucalyptus-trees, close to the dried-up fountain, when two men and a woman came up and asked me to drive them to the Lido di Lavinio. I examined them while we discussed the price. One of the men was fair-haired, tall and big, with a colourless, almost grey face and eyes like pieces of blue china deep-set in dark sockets—a man of about thirty-five. The other, younger one was dark, with untidy hair and tortoiseshell-rimmed spectacles; he was thin and listless-looking, and might have been a student. As for the woman, she was almost painfully thin, with a long, sharp face between two waves of loose hair and a narrow body in a tight green dress that made her look like a snake. But she had a full, red mouth, like a fruit, and beautiful eyes, black and shining like wet coal; and the way she looked at me made me want to accept the job. I agreed, in fact, to the first price they offered me; and then they got in, the fair man next to me, the other two behind; and off we went.

I went right across Rome so as to take the road past the Basilica of San Paolo, which is the shortest way to Anzio. At the Basilica I filled up with petrol and then started off along this road at a good speed. I calculated the distance to be about fifty kilometres; it was now half past nine, so that we should arrive about eleven, in nice time for a bathe in the sea. I had found the girl attractive and hoped to strike up a friendship with her. They were not very classy sort of people. The two men seemed, from their accents, to be foreigners, possibly refugees, like the ones who lived in the camps round about Rome. The girl, on the other hand, was Italian, Roman in fact, and there was nothing very grand about *her*, either: you might have supposed her to be a servant-girl or a laundress or something of that kind. While these

thoughts were going through my mind I was listening carefully, and I could hear the girl and the dark young man chattering and laughing in the back of the car. It was the girl, especially, who was laughing, for, as I had already noticed, she was rather an uncouth, wriggling sort of creature, like a tipsy little snake. The fair man, hearing these peals of laughter, wrinkled up his nose below his dark sun-glasses, but he did not say anything and did not even turn round. But it is true that all he needed to do was to raise his eyes to the little mirror on the windscreen in order to see perfectly well what was going on behind him. We passed the Trappist monastery and went on without stopping as far as the Anzio fork. Here I slowed down and asked the fair man beside me where exactly they wanted to be taken. He answered: "To some quiet place where there isn't anybody. . . . We want to be alone." "There are thirty kilometres of deserted beach along here," I said. "It's up to you to decide." The girl cried from the back of the car: "Let's let *him* decide." "What's it got to do with me?" I replied. But the girl went on crying: "Let's let *him* decide," and she laughed as if the remark were extremely comic. So then I said: "The Lido di Lavinio is very crowded . . . but I'll take you to a place not far off where there isn't a living soul." These words made the girl laugh again, and she slapped me on the shoulder from behind, saying: "Well done. . . . You're a very intelligent man . . . you understand just what we want." I didn't know what to make of this behaviour; I found it rather irritating, but it also made me hopeful. The fair man kept gloomily silent, and finally said: "Pina, it doesn't seem to me that there's anything to laugh at." And so we started off again.

There was an intense, windless heat, and a glare from the surface of the road; the couple in the back of the car kept up their ceaseless chatter and laughter, until, quite suddenly, they were silent, and this was worse because I saw the fair man look into the mirror on the windscreen and then wrinkle up his nose as though he had seen something that displeased him. There were now, on one side of the road, bare, dry fields, and, on the other, close-growing scrub. At a point where there was a notice-board announcing a game-preserve I slowed down, turned, and started along a narrow, winding track. I had been there

shooting in the winter and knew it to be a completely solitary place, impossible to discover unless one knew about it. Beyond the scrub was the pine-wood and beyond the pine-wood the beach and the sea. I knew that the Americans, during the Anzio landings, had established a beachhead in the pine-wood here, and the trenches were still there, and a lot of rusty tins and empty boxes, and people did not go there for fear of mines.

The sun was blazing and the whole of the sprouting surface of the scrub was glistening almost white in the brilliant light. The track went straight ahead, then turned through a clearing and went into the scrub again. We could see the pines now, their green heads, puffed out by the wind, seeming to sail across the sky, and the sea, blue and hard and sparkling, between their red trunks. I drove slowly because I could not see very clearly amongst all these bushes and it's quite easy to break a spring. All of a sudden, while my attention was fixed on the track, the fair man sitting beside me gave me a violent shove with his whole body, in such a way that I was almost flung out of the window. "What the devil. . . ?" I exclaimed, jamming on the brakes. At the same time there was a sharp report right behind me and I gasped open-mouthed as I saw, in the windscreen, a flower-like star of tiny cracks with a round hole in the middle of it. My blood froze and I was just going to jump out of the car shouting "Murderers": but the dark young man, who had fired the shot, pressed the muzzle of the revolver into my back, saying: "Don't move."

I sat still and asked: "What d'you want?" The dark man answered: "If that idiot hadn't barged into you, there'd be no need to tell you now. . . . We want your car." The fair man said, through clenched teeth: "I'm not an idiot." The other replied: "Yes, you are . . . why, hadn't we agreed that I was to shoot him? Why did you move?" The fair man retorted: "We also agreed that you were to leave Pina alone . . . you moved too." The girl started laughing and said: "We're in the soup now." "Why?" "Because he'll go back to Rome and report us." "Quite right too," said the fair man. He pulled a cigarette out of his pocket, lit it and began smoking. The dark man turned irresolutely towards the girl: "Well, what *are* we to do?" I raised my eyes to the little mirror and

saw her crouching back into her corner and making a gesture, in my direction, with her thumb and forefinger, as much as to say: "Finish him off." Once more my blood froze; but I breathed again when I heard the dark man say, in a tone of profound conviction: "No, there are some things one only has the courage to do once. . . . I've lost the impulse now and I can't do it."

My courage revived again and I said: "What are you going to do with the taxi? Who's going to falsify the number for you? Who's going to repaint it?" At each question I realized that they had no one to help them and that they did not know what to do now: they had decided to kill me and, since they had not been successful in this, they no longer had the courage even to rob me. However, the dark man said: "We've got everything, don't worry." But the fair man remarked sardonically: "We've got nothing, all we've got is twenty thousand lire between the three of us and a revolver that fails to shoot." At that moment I again raised my eyes towards the little mirror and again saw the girl make that charming gesture in my direction. So I said to her, "Signorina," I said, "when we get back to Rome that gesture is going to cost you an extra few years in prison." Then I half turned towards the dark man, who was still pointing the revolver at my back, and shouted in exasperation: "Well, what are you waiting for? Shoot, you coward, shoot!" My voice echoed in the profound silence and the girl, in sympathy this time, cried: "You know who's the only one with any courage here? *He* is," pointing to me. The dark man muttered something that sounded like a curse, spat to one side and then opened the door, jumped out and came and stood in front of me, close to the window. He said in a furious voice: "Come on then, quickly, how much d'you want to take us back to Rome and not report us?" I realized the danger was over and said slowly: "I don't want anything . . . and I'll take you straight to the Regina Coeli prison, all three of you." The dark man was not frightened, it must be admitted, he was too desperate and too much exasperated. He simply said: "Then I'll kill you." "All right, try," I said; "I tell you you won't kill anybody. . . . I tell you also that I shall see you behind bars, you and that slut of a girl-friend of yours, and him too." "All right then," he said in a low voice, and I

saw that he was in earnest, and he did in fact take a step back and raise his pistol. Luckily, at that moment, the girl cried: "Stop that! . . . Surely, instead of offering him money, you can use your revolver to make him do what you want. . . . He'll do what he's told all right." As she spoke, she leant across behind me and then I felt her tickling my ear with her fingers, very gently, and in such a way that the other two did not see. I felt very much excited because, as I have said, she attracted me, and, I don't know why, I was convinced that she found me attractive too. I looked at the dark man who was still pointing the pistol at me; I looked sideways at her as she stared at me with her coal-black, smiling eyes, and then I said to him: "You can keep your money. . . . I'm not a bandit like you. . . . But I'm not taking you back to Rome. . . . I'll take *her* back and no one else, and that's simply because she's a woman." I thought they would protest, but instead, to my surprise, the fair man immediately jumped out of the car and said: "Hope you get there safe." The dark man lowered his revolver. The girl, brisk as anything, came and sat beside me. "Good-bye, then," I said, "and let's hope they'll send you to prison soon"; and then I turned, steering with only one hand because she was squeezing the other in hers, and I didn't in the least mind the two men understanding the reason why I had shown myself so pliable.

I went back to the road and drove for five kilometres without opening my mouth. She was squeezing my hand all the time and I was well satisfied. I too was now looking for a lonely spot, though my purposes were different from theirs. But when I stopped and made as if to turn into a track leading to the sea, she placed her hand on the steering-wheel, saying: "No, what are you doing? We are going back to Rome." I looked hard at her, and said: "We'll go back to Rome this evening." "I understand now," she said, "you're just like the others." Limp and cold and deceitful, she whimpered at me, and you could see a mile off that she was putting it on; and when I made as though to embrace her, she drooped first to one side and then to the other, so that there was no possible way of kissing her. I am hot-blooded and soon I grew very angry. All of a sudden I realized that she had been playing me up, and that this damned expedition

had been, as far as I was concerned, a waste of petrol and time and of fear too; and, filled with rage, I pushed her violently away from me, saying: "Go to hell then, and stay there." At once she drew back into the corner, not in the least offended. I moved on again and we neither of us spoke until we reached Rome.

Then I stopped, threw open the door, and said to her: "Get out now, and clear off, as quick as you can." She answered, with an air of surprise: "But really! Are you angry with me?" I just couldn't stand any more, and I shouted at her: "My God, you wanted to murder me, you've made me waste my time and my petrol and my money . . . and then I'm not supposed to be angry with you! You can thank Heaven I'm not taking you to the police." D'you know what she answered? "How fanatical you are!" Then she got out and, with the greatest possible dignity and pride and haughtiness, wriggling all over in that tight, snake-like dress, walked off amongst the cars and the traffic of Porta San Giovanni. I sat dazed, staring at her as she went away, until she disappeared. At that moment someone jumped into the taxi, crying: "Piazza del Popolo."

RAIN IN MAY

ONE of these days I shall go back to Monte Mario, to the Osteria dei Cacciatori, but I shall go with my friends, my Sunday friends, who play the concertina and, if there aren't any girls, dance together. I shall never have the courage to go alone. At night, sometimes, I dream of the inn tables, with the warm May rain beating down on them, and of the frowning trees dripping on to the tables, and between the trees, in the background, the white clouds passing, and, below the clouds, the panorama of the houses of Rome. And I seem to hear the voice of the landlord, Antonio Tocchi, as I heard it that morning, calling, furiously, from the cellar: "Dirce, Dirce": and I seem to see her again, throwing me a

glance of complicity before going off down into the cellar, her firm step resounding on the stairs. I had arrived there purely by chance, when I came to Rome from the country: and when they offered me the job of waiter *au pair*, without paying me anything, I thought: "I shan't have any money, but at least I shall be living as one of a family." What a family, indeed! Instead of a family I found an inferno. The landlord was as round and fat as a pat of butter, but with a nasty, sour kind of fatness. He had a broad, grey face, with, as a result of this fatness, a whole lot of fine wrinkles running all round it, and two small, beady eyes, like those of a snake: he was always in a waistcoat and shirtsleeves, with a grey peaked cap pulled down over his eyes. His daughter Dirce was, as regards character, no better than her father, she also being hard, ill-natured, harsh; but she was beautiful—one of those small, muscular, well-made women who move their hips and their feet firmly as they walk, as much as to say: "This earth belongs to me." She had a broad face, with black eyes and black hair, and was as pale as a corpse. It was only the mother, in that house, who had, perhaps, a kindly character: she was a woman of about forty who looked sixty, thin, with the nose of an old woman and an old woman's lank hair; but perhaps she was merely half-witted—anyhow, you might have thought so, seeing her standing in front of the cooking-stove with her whole face twisted in secret, silent laughter; if she turned round, you saw that she had one or two teeth, and that was all.

The inn opened on to the road with a sign in the form of an arch, ox-blood in colour, with the words "Osteria dei Cacciatori, Proprietor Antonio Tocchi" painted on it in yellow. From there an avenue led to the tables, which were under the trees and facing the panorama of Rome. The house itself was rustic, all wall and hardly any window, roofed with tiles. The summer was the best time: people came up there from morning till midnight —families with babies, loving couples, groups of men—and sat at the tables drinking wine and eating Tocchi's food and looking at the view. We never had time to draw breath: we two men serving all the time, the two women perpetually cooking and washing up; and in the evening we were tired out and went off to bed without

even looking at each other. But in the winter, or even in the good season if it rained, troubles began. The father and daughter hated each other; but to say they hated each other is putting it mildly, they would gladly have killed each other. The father was tyrannical, mean, stupid, and would start laying about him for the merest trifle; the daughter was as hard as a rock, secretive, always determined to have the last word, arrogantly obstinate. Perhaps they hated each other most of all because they were of the same blood, and, as is well known, there's nothing like a blood relationship to make people hate each other; but they hated each other also for reasons of interest. The daughter was ambitious: she said that, with that panorama of Rome, they had a ready-made capital ripe for exploitation, instead of which they were letting the whole thing go to the dogs. She said that her father ought to build a cement platform for dancing, and engage a band and hang up Chinese lanterns, and transform the house into a modern restaurant and call it the Panorama Restaurant. But the father would not trust himself, partly because he was mean and an enemy of all novelty; partly because it was his daughter who suggested it, and he would rather have had his throat cut than give in to his daughter. The quarrels between father and daughter always took place at table: she would launch an attack, in a nasty, offensive manner, on some personal matter—let us say because her father had belched while eating; he would retort with coarse, blasphemous expressions; the daughter would persist; the father would slap her face. It must be said that he evidently enjoyed hitting her, for he made a special sort of face as he did it, catching his lower lip with his teeth and screwing up his eyes. But to the daughter the blow was like fresh water on a flower: she blossomed forth anew with hatred and nastiness. Then her father would seize her by the hair and rain blows upon her. Plates and glasses would fall to the floor, and the mother would join in too, trying to intervene, but in a half-witted sort of way, with that everlasting grin on her toothless mouth; whilst I, my heart swelling with poison, would leave the house and go for a walk along the main road to La Camilluccia.

I should already have left, long before that, if I had not fallen in love with Dirce. I am not the type of man

to fall in love easily, because I am a practical person and words and looks do not bewitch me. But when a woman gives, not words and looks, but herself, all complete, in flesh and blood—and by surprise, into the bargain—then a man is properly caught, as if in a trap, and the more efforts he makes to free himself the deeper the teeth of the trap sink into his flesh. Dirce must have had an intention of this kind even before she knew me, and whether it was I or some other man made no difference to her, for, on the night of the very day I arrived, she came into my room when I had already gone to sleep; and so, between sleeping and waking, so that I scarcely knew whether it was dream or reality, she took me at one bound from indifference to passion. Between us two, in fact, there were no conversations, nor glances, nor hand-touchings, nor any of the other subterfuges that lovers use to tell of their love for one another; on the contrary, it was like being with a loose woman, and a cheap one at that. Only Dirce was not a loose woman; in fact she was known to be virtuous and haughty, and it was precisely this difference that constituted, for me, the trap in which I was caught.

I am patient and reasonable by nature; but I am also violent and, if people irritate me, the blood rushes quickly to my head. This can be seen in my physical appearance; I am fair, with a pale face, but anything is enough to make me turn scarlet. Now Dirce irritated me and I soon discovered the reason why: she wanted me to take her side against her father. She said I was a coward to allow her father, in my presence, to hit her and then seize her by the hair and even to go so far—as happened on one occasion—as to throw her down on to the floor and start kicking her. And I am not saying she wasn't right: we were lovers and I ought to have defended her. But I realized that she had another purpose in view; and, what with rage at being insulted as a coward and rage at knowing that she was using the word with a deliberate object, I couldn't stand it any longer. One fine day, however, she changed her tune: how lovely it would be if we could get married and start the "Panorama Restaurant", she and I, all on our own. She had turned as good as gold, gentle, loving, sweet. This was the best period of our love affair; but I could hardly recognize her now and

I thought: there's a catch in it somewhere. And indeed, all of a sudden, she changed her tune yet again and said that, married or not, we could hope for nothing as long as her father was there; in short—as she said to me frankly—we must kill him. It was like that first night when she came into my room—no preparation and no humbug; she threw down this proposition and went off, leaving me to think it over by myself.

Next day I told her she was making a mistake if she thought I would help her in a thing like that, and she answered me that, in that case, I had better make up my mind to go away at once because for her I no longer existed. And she kept her word, for from that day she scarcely looked at me. We hardly spoke to each other, and my reaction to this was that I took to hating the father because it seemed to me that it was his fault. As it so happened, the father started a quarrel every day during that time, and he seemed to be doing it on purpose to make himself hated. It was the month of May, which is the good season when people come up to the inn to drink wine and eat new beans; but instead, it rained all the time in torrents upon the green, lush countryside; not so much as a dog came to the inn, and he was always in a bad temper. One day, at table, he pushed away his plate, saying: "You give me this filthy sticky soup on purpose." "If I did it on purpose," she replied, "I should put poison in it." He looked at her and slapped her face, hard, so that the comb jumped out of her hair. We were almost in darkness because of the rain, and Dirce's face, in the darkness, was white and still as marble, and her hair, on the side from which the comb had fallen, undid itself very, very slowly, like a bunch of awakening snakes. I said to Tocchi: "Will you be so kind as to stop that?" "It's none of your business," he replied, but he was astonished because it was the first time I had interfered. I experienced at that moment a feeling almost of vanity, as thought I were protecting a feeble creature, which was not quite the case; and I thought that in this way I would get possession of her again, and that this was the only way to get possession of her again, and so I said in a loud voice: "Stop that, d'you understand? I won't allow it." I was red as fire, and my blood was up, and Dirce took my hand under the table and I realized

that I was in her clutches, but it was too late now. He jumped to his feet and said: "There's one for you too."

He swiped me across the cheek, rather crookedly, and I seized hold of a glass and flung the whole of the wine in it into his face. I believe I must have been thinking of that glass and that wine for a month beforehand, so pleased was I with this gesture of mine and so intensely did I hate Tocchi. And now *he* had the wine all over his face and *I* had made the gesture, and I ran off up the stairs. I heard him shout after me: "I'll kill you, you scum, you vagabond!" Then I closed the door of my room and went over to the window to look at the rain falling, and in my rage I took a knife that I kept in a drawer and planted it in the window-sill with such force that the blade broke.

Well, there we were, up there on that ill-omened Monte Mario, and perhaps, if I had been in Rome, I should not have agreed to it, but up there everything became natural and the thing which had been impossible the day before, was already decided the day after. And so Dirce and I came to an understanding and together we determined upon the means and the day and the hour. Tocchi, in the morning, used to go down into the cellar to fetch up the wine for the day, together with Dirce carrying the big bottle to be filled. The cellar was below the level of the ground and the descent to it was by a short stairway mounted on a frame and supported against the wall: there must have been about seven steps. We decided that I should join them down in the cellar and, while Tocchi bent down to tap the wine-cask, I should hit him over the head with a short iron bolt that was used for poking the fire. Then we would pull away the steps and would say he had fallen down and broken his skull. I wanted to and I didn't want to; and because I was in a rage I said: "I'll do it to show you I'm not afraid . . . but afterwards I shall go away and I shan't come back." "In that case," she answered, "it's better for you not to do anything and to go away at once. . . . I love you and I don't want to lose you." She knew how to feign passion when she wanted to; and so I told her I would do it and that afterwards I would stay and we would open the restaurant.

On the day fixed Tocchi told Dirce to fetch the big bottle, and then went off towards the door of the cellar,

which was at the far corner of the house. It was raining, as usual, and inside the inn it was almost dark. Dirce fetched the big bottle and followed her father; but before she went down into the cellar she turned towards me and made a quite obvious gesture of understanding. Her mother, who was in front of the stove, saw this gesture and stood there open-mouthed, staring at us. I got up from the table, went to the stove and took the poker from the fireplace, passing right in front of her. She looked at me, she looked at Dirce, and she said a good deal with her eyes, but it was already clear that she was not going to speak. Dirce's father was yelling at her from the cellar: "Dirce, Dirce," and she answered: "Coming." I remember that I thought her physically attractive for the last time as she went off down the steps with that firm, sensual walk of hers, bending her round, white neck under the cross-beam of the door.

At that moment the door leading into the garden was opened and a man with a wet sack over his shoulders came in—a carter. Without looking at me, he said: "Give us a hand, mate, will you?"—and I, automatically, still holding the poker, followed him out. They were building a stable at the farm close by, and his cart, loaded with stones, had stuck in the mud as it went in at the gate and the horse was unable to move it. The carter, an ugly, deformed, bestial-looking man, appeared beside himself with rage. I put down the poker on top of one of the gate-posts, placed two stones under the wheels and pushed; the carter pulled the horse forward by its halter. It was raining in torrents on the thick, green hedges of elder and the acacias in flower, which smelt strongly; the cart did not move and the carter swore. He took up his whip and laid on to the horse with the handle; then, becoming ferocious, he seized hold of the poker which I had placed on top of the gate-post. You could see that he was beside himself with rage not because of the cart but because of his whole life, and that he hated the horse like a person. "He's going to kill it now," I thought; and I was just going to shout: "No, leave that poker alone." But then I thought that, if he killed the horse, I was safe. It seemed to me that the whole of my fury was passing into the body of that carter, who appeared like a man possessed; and he did, in fact, hurl himself on the shafts

of the cart, give another push, and then start laying on to the horse's head with the poker. At the first blow I shut my eyes, and then I heard him continuing to strike, and all the time my strength was failing and I was almost fainting; and then I opened my eyes again and saw that the horse had fallen on its knees and that he was still hitting it—not, now, to make it get up but actually to kill it. The horse fell down on its side, kicked its feet in the air, in a feeble way; and then dropped its head in the mud. The carter, panting for breath, his face distorted, threw away the poker and gave the horse a shove—but without conviction: he knew he had killed it. I passed close by him, but without brushing against him, and started walking along the main road. The tram came past on its way in to Rome and I ran and jumped on it and then looked back and saw, for the last time, the inn sign: "Osteria dei Cacciatori, Proprietor Antonio Tocchi", amongst the rain-soaked May foliage.

DON'T DELVE TOO DEEPLY

AGNESE could surely have given me some warning, instead of going away like that, without so much as telling me to go to blazes. I don't claim to be perfect, and if she had told me what it was she was needing, we could have discussed the matter. But no, not at all; in two years of married life, not a word; and then, one morning, taking advantage of a moment when I was not there, off she sneaked, like a servant-girl who has found a better place. She went; and even now, six months after she left me, I don't understand why it was.

That morning, after doing the household shopping at the little local market (I like to do the shopping myself: I know the prices, I know what I want, I like bargaining and arguing, sampling and handling, I want to know what sort of a beast my beefsteak comes from and out of which basket my apple is taken), I had gone out again to buy a yard and a half of fringe to sew on to the curtain

in the dining-room. Since I did not want to spend more than so much, I went to several places before I found exactly the thing that suited me, in a little shop in the Via dell'Umiltà. It was about twenty past eleven when I got home; I went into the dining-room in order to compare the colour of the fringe with the colour of the curtain, and I at once saw, on the table, the inkstand and the pen and a letter. To tell the truth, what struck me most of all was an ink-stain on the tablecloth. "Why in the world," I thought, "does she have to be so clumsy? . . . She's made a stain on the tablecloth." I removed the inkstand, the pen and the letter, took up the tablecloth, went with it into the kitchen, and there, by dint of rubbing it hard with a lemon, managed to take out the stain. Then I went back into the dining-room and replaced the tablecloth; and only then did I remember the letter. It was addressed to me: Alfredo. I opened it and read: "I have done the housework. You can cook the lunch yourself, you're quite accustomed to it. Good-bye. I am going back to Mother's. Agnese." For a moment I understood nothing. Then I read the letter again and at last it dawned upon me: Agnese had gone away, she had left me after two years of married life. From force of habit I put the letter into the drawer of the sideboard where I keep receipts and correspondence, and sat down on a chair beside the window. I did not know what to think, I was quite unprepared and I scarcely believed it. As I sat reflecting thus, my eye fell on the floor and I saw a little white feather which must have come off the feather-brush when Agnese was doing the dusting. I picked up the feather, opened the window and threw it out. Then I took my hat and went out of the house.

As I walked along—treading, according to a special vice of mine, on every *other* paving-stone—I began to ask myself what I could have done to Agnese that she should leave me in such a very unkind way, as though with a deliberate intention of affronting me. In the first place, I thought, let us see whether Agnese can find fault with me for any kind of unfaithfulness, even the very slightest. I at once answered myself: none whatever. Indeed I have never been crazy about women, I don't understand them and they don't understand me; and, from the day I got married, it may be said that they ceased to exist for me.

To such an extent, in fact, that Agnese herself used to irritate me by asking me from time to time: "What would you do if you fell in love with another woman?" And I would answer: "It is impossible: I love you and that feeling will last me all my life." Now, thinking over it again, I seemed to recall that this "all my life" had not given her any pleasure: on the contrary, she had pulled a long face and relapsed into silence. Going on to an entirely different set of ideas, I was anxious to discover whether by any chance Agnese might have left me for reasons of money and, in fact, of my treatment of her in general. But, here again, I found that my conscience was clear. With regard to money, it is true that I never gave her any except for some exceptional reason, but then, what need had she of money? I myself was always at hand, ready to pay. And as for the way I treated her, goodness me, there was nothing unkind about *that*: you can judge for yourselves. The cinema twice a week; twice a week to a café, and no matter whether she had an ice or just a cup of coffee; a couple of illustrated magazines every month and the newspaper every day; in winter, the opera into the bargain; in summer a holiday at Marino, at my father's house. So much for amusements; and coming on to the question of clothes, Agnese had even less to complain about. When she needed anything, whether it was a brassière or a pair of stockings or a handkerchief, I was always ready: I went with her to the shops, I helped her choose the article, I paid without any fuss. It was the same with dressmakers and milliners; there was never a single occasion when she said to me: "I need a hat, I need a dress," that I did not answer: "Come along, I'll go with you." Moreover, it must be admitted that Agnese was not exacting: after the first year she ceased almost entirely to have any clothes made for her. It was I, in fact, who now had to remind her that she needed this or that garment. But she used to reply that she had the things from the year before and that it didn't matter; so that in the end I came to think that, from this point of view, she must be different from other women and that she didn't mind about being well-dressed.

So it had nothing to do either with affairs of the heart or with money. There remained what lawyers call "incompatibility of temperament". I now asked myself: what

incompatibility of temperament could possibly exist when, in two years, there had never been a dispute between us, not a single one? We were always together, and if this incompatibility had existed, it would have made itself apparent. But Agnese never contradicted me, in fact it can almost be said that she never spoke. During some of the evenings we spent at the café or at home she hardly even opened her mouth; it was I who did all the talking. I don't deny it, I like talking and hearing myself talk, especially if I am with a person with whom I am on terms of intimacy. My way of speaking is quiet, uniform, with no great heights or depths, reasonable, flowing; and if I attack a subject, I pull it to pieces, from top to bottom, in all its aspects. And the subjects I prefer are domestic ones: I like to converse about the prices of things, about the arrangement of the furniture, about the cooking and the heating, about any sort of nonsense, in fact. I should never get tired of talking about these things; I take such a great interest in them that I often catch myself starting all over again, with the same arguments. And—let us be just—with a woman these are surely the right subjects of conversation: otherwise, what would one talk about? Agnese, in any case, used to listen to me attentively—at least so it seemed to me. Only once, when I was explaining how the electric water-heater worked, did I become aware that she had gone to sleep. I woke her up and asked her: "Why, were you bored?" She answered at once: "No, no, I was tired, I slept badly last night."

Husbands usually have their offices or shops or else they have nothing at all and go out with their friends. But in my case, my office, my shop, my friends—were Agnese. I never left her alone for a moment, I stayed at her side even—perhaps you will be surprised—while she was cooking. I have a passion for cooking and every day, before meals, I used to put on an apron and help Agnese in the kitchen. I did all sorts of things: I peeled the potatoes, shredded the French beans, prepared the stuffing, watched the saucepans. I helped her so well that she often used to say to me: "Look here, you do it . . . I've got a headache; I'm going to lie down." And then I did the cooking by myself; and, with the aid of the cookery book, I was even able to try new dishes. It was such a

pity that Agnese was not greedy; in fact recently her appetite had left her altogether and she hardly touched her food. Once she said to me—just as a joke, of course: "You made a mistake in being born a man. . . . You're really a woman—a housewife, in fact." I must admit that there was some truth in this remark: as a matter of fact, besides cooking I like washing, ironing, sewing and even, in my leisure moments, re-doing the hemstitching of handkerchiefs. As I say, I never left her, not even when some girl friend or her mother came to see her; not even when she took it into her head, for some reason or other, to have lessons in English: in order to be with her, I, too, made efforts to learn that extremely difficult language. I was so closely attached to her that sometimes I even made myself feel ridiculous—as on that occasion when, not having caught something she had said to me in a low voice, in a café, I followed her right to the lavatory and the attendant stopped me, telling me it was the ladies' lavatory and I could not go in. Oh yes, a husband like me is not easily found. Often she would say to me: "I've got to go to such a place, to see such-and-such a person who's of no interest to you." But I would answer her: "I'll come too . . . anyhow, I've got nothing to do." Then she would reply: "Come, as far as I'm concerned, but I warn you you'll be bored." But not at all, I was not in the least bored, and afterwards I told her: "You see, I wasn't bored." We were, in fact, inseparable.

Thinking over these things and wondering all the time in vain why Agnese should have left me, I arrived at my father's shop. It is a shop that sells sacred objects and it is in the neighbourhood of the Piazza Minerva. My father is a man still young, with black, curly hair, a black moustache, and, beneath the moustache, a smile I have never understood. Perhaps because he is in the habit of dealing with priests and devout persons, he is very, very gentle, quiet, and always well-mannered. But my mother, who knows him well, says that his nerves are all hidden away inside him. Well, I went past all the glass cases full of chasubles and sacred vessels and walked straight into the room behind the shop where he has his desk. As usual he was doing his accounts, biting his moustache and meditating. Breathlessly I said to him: "Father, Agnese has left me."

He looked up and it seemed to me that he was smiling beneath his moustache; but perhaps this was just an impression. "I'm sorry," he said, "I'm very sorry. . . . But how did it happen?"

I told him the whole story. And I concluded: "Of course, I'm vexed about it. . . . But what I want to know more than anything is *why* she's left me."

Puzzled, he asked: "Don't you understand it?"

"No."

He remained silent for a moment and then said with a sigh: "Alfredo, I'm sorry, but I don't know what to say to you. . . . You're my son, I support you and I'm very fond of you . . . but your wife—that's your own business."

"Yes, but why has she left me?"

He wagged his head. "If I were you, I shouldn't delve too deeply," he said. "Leave it alone. . . . What does it matter to you to know the reasons?"

"It matters a great deal to me . . . more than anything."

At that moment two priests came in, and my father rose and went to meet them, saying to me: "Come back later . . . we'll have a talk then . . . I'm busy now." I realized I couldn't expect anything more from him and went out.

Agnese's mother's house was not far off, in the Corso Vittorio. I reflected that the only person who could explain to me the mystery of her departure was Agnese herself; so I went there. I ran upstairs, and was shown into the sitting-room. But, instead of Agnese, her mother came in. She too owned a shop, and she was a woman I could not bear, with her dyed black hair, her florid cheeks, her smiling, sly, artificial air. She was wearing a dressing-gown, with a rose at her breast. When she saw me, she said, with feigned cordiality: "Oh, Alfredo, what are *you* doing here?"

"You know why I've come," I answered. "Agnese has left me."

"Yes, she's here," she said calmly. "My dear boy, what is there to be done about it? These are things that just happen."

"What, is that the only answer you can give me?"

She considered me for a moment and then asked: "Have you told your own parents about it?"

"Yes, I've told my father."

"And what did *he* say?"

What in the world had it to do with her, what my father had said? Unwillingly I replied: "You know what my father's like. . . . He says I had better not delve too deeply."

"He's quite right, my dear boy. . . . Don't delve too deeply."

"But really," I exclaimed, becoming heated, "*why* is it she's left me? What have I done to her? Why don't you tell me?"

While I was speaking, all angry as I was, my eye fell on the table. It was covered with a cloth and on the cloth was an embroidered white centrepiece and on the centrepiece was a vase of red carnations. But the centrepiece was crooked. Automatically, without knowing what I was doing, while she looked at me smiling and did not answer me, I lifted the vase and put the centrepiece in place. Then she said: "Well done, now the centrepiece is right in the middle. . . . I hadn't noticed it, but you saw it at once. . . . Well done . . . and now you'd better go, my dear boy."

She had risen; meanwhile, I rose too. I wanted to ask if I might see Agnese, but I realized it was useless; also I was afraid, if I saw her, that I might lose my head and do or say something stupid. So I went away, and from that day to this I have never seen my wife. Some day, perhaps, she will come back, seeing that husbands like me are not to be met with every day of the week. But she's not going to cross the threshold of my house unless she first explains to me why it was that she left me.

HOT WEATHER JOKES

WHEN summer comes, perhaps because I am still young and have not yet adapted myself to the fact that I am a husband and the father of a family, I am seized al-

ways by a longing to run away. In summer, in rich people's houses, they close the windows in the morning and the cool air of the night lingers in the big, dim rooms, where mirrors and marble floors and wax-polished furniture gleam in the half-light. Everything is in its right place, everything is clean and well-ordered and bright; even the silence is a cool, restful, dark silence. If you are thirsty, someone brings you, on a tray, a lovely iced drink, an orangeade, a lemonade, in a crystal tumbler in which the little lumps of ice, as you stir them, make a gay sound that is refreshing in itself. But in poor people's houses things are different. On the first hot day, sweltering heat comes right into your small, stifling rooms and stays there. You want a drink but from the kitchen tap comes water so warm that it is like soup. Indoors you can scarcely move: everything—furniture, clothes, household implements—seems to be swollen in size and to be tumbling on top of you. Everyone is in shirtsleeves, but their shirts are sweaty and smelly. If you shut the windows, you suffocate, because the night air has not managed to penetrate into those two or three rooms in which six people sleep; if you open them, you are exposed to the full sunshine and you might as well be in the street and everything smells of red-hot metal and sweat and dust. In the heat, people's characters become heated too; I mean they become quarrelsome: the rich man, if the fancy takes him, simply goes off to the other end of the flat, three or four rooms away; poor people, on the other hand, have to stay, packed like sardines, amongst greasy dishes and dirty glasses—or else leave the house.

On one of those hot days, I had a real good row with the whole family—that is, with my wife because the soup was salty and boiling hot; with my brother-in-law because he took my wife's side and, to my way of thinking, had no right to do so, seeing that he was out of work and being supported by me; with my sister-in-law because she defended me, and this disgusted me since I knew she was doing it from coquettishness, being in love with me; with my mother because she tried to calm me down; with my father because he protested that he wanted to eat his meal in peace and quiet; and even with the little girl, because she had burst into tears. So all of a

sudden I jumped to my feet, took my jacket from the chair, and said quite simply: "Now, just listen to me. I'm fed up with the whole lot of you, so good-bye till October, when the cool weather comes." And I walked out of the house. My wife, poor dear, ran after me and, looking down over the banisters, called out to me that there was cucumber salad, which I am very fond of. I told her to eat it herself and went down into the street.

We live in the Via Ostiense. I crossed the street and walked along, automatically, to the iron bridge, close to which is the river port of Rome. It was two o'clock, the hottest time of the day, and the sky, threatening a *scirocco,* was as livid as a punched, bruised eye. When I reached the bridge, I leant against the nail-studded iron parapet; it was scorching. The Tiber, confined between quays at the bottom of great sloping walls, looked like an open sewer and had the same muddy colour. The gasometer, looking like the skeleton of a building after a fire, the furnaces of the gasworks, the silo towers, the pipes of the petrol tanks, and the pointed roofs of the electric power station blocked the horizon, in such a way as to make you think you were not in Rome but in some industrial town in the North. I stood for a time looking at the Tiber, the small, yellow Tiber with a barge full of bags of cement lying beside the quay, and I could not help laughing at the thought that this little rivulet called itself a port, just like the ports of Genoa and Naples which are thronged with ships of all sizes. If I really wanted to run away from this little port I could probably get down to Fiumicino, where I could sit and eat fried fish within view of the sea. At last I moved on again, crossing the bridge and going in the direction of a stretch of open country lying on the far side of the river. Although I lived near by, I had never been there and did not know where I was going. At first I walked along a road which, though it ran through bare fields sprinkled with rubbish, was a regular asphalt road; then this road turned into an earthy lane and the rubbish grew into high heaps like little hills. I realized I had stumbled right into the place where they discharge the whole of Rome's refuse: there was not a blade of grass to be seen, nothing but dirty bits of paper, rusty tins, cabbage-stalks and other debris, in a blinding light and with an acid stink of

decayed matter. I felt lost and bewildered, as if I had no desire to go any further and yet at the same time did not want to turn back. All at once I heard someone calling "psst . . . psst . . .", as you might call to a dog.

I turned to see where the dog could be. But there were no dogs, although, with all that disintegrating rubbish, it was just the place for stray dogs; so I thought that somebody must be calling me and looked in the direction from which the call had come. Then I saw, sheltering behind the rubbish-heaps, a minute, crooked little hut with a corrugated iron roof, which I had not noticed before. A small, fair-haired girl, about eight years old perhaps, was standing in the doorway and beckoning to me to come in. I looked at her: she had a white, dirty face with purple marks under her eyes, like a grown-up woman. Her hair, full of straws and bits of down and dust, made her head look as swollen and bristling as a kite's. Her dress was simple: a canvas sack with four holes in it, two for her arms and two for her legs. The moment I turned round she asked me: "You a doctor?"

"No," I answered. "Why? D'you need a doctor?"

"Because if you're a doctor," she went on, "come in: Mummy's ill."

I did not wish to go on trying to prove that I was not a doctor, so I went into the hut. At first I felt I must have come into a second-hand clothes dealer's shop in the Campo di Fiori. Everything was hanging from the ceiling—clothes, stockings, shoes, household utensils and pots and pans and rags. Then I realized that it was their own stuff, hung up on nails because there was no furniture. As I moved this way and that, bending my head to avoid these dangling objects and searching for her mother, the little girl pointed, with an almost furtive gesture, to a pile of rags in a corner. I looked closer and became aware that this pile of rags was staring at me with a single glittering eye, the other eye being covered by a lock of grey hair. I was struck by the woman's appearance: she looked like an old woman, and yet one realized that she was young. Seeing me, she immediately said: "So we meet again."

The child burst out laughing, as though this were the beginning of some amusing spectacle, and then squatted down on the ground, playing with some empty preserve

tins. "Really, I don't know you," I said. "What's the matter with you? . . . Is this little girl your daughter?"

"Of course she is," the woman replied; "and yours too."

The child laughed again, to herself, with her head down. I thought it must all be a joke, and answered: "Well, perhaps she's my daughter, but she's some other man's as well."

"No," said the woman, half rising from the floor and pointing a finger at me, "she's your child and nobody else's. . . . A lazy, idle, cowardly shirker—that's what you are."

At the sound of these insulting words the child started laughing heartily: it was just as though she had been expecting them. I was offended, and said: "You be careful what you say. . . . I've already told you I don't know you."

"You don't know me, eh? . . . You don't know me but you've come back all the same. . . . If you didn't know me, how did you manage to find the way to the house?"

"Cowardly shirker," the child started chanting in a low voice. I was sweating now, partly from the stifling heat and partly from uneasiness. "I just happened to be passing," I said.

"Oh yes, you poor fool. . . ." She turned towards the child and bade her: "Give me the bag." The child, with a nimble movement, took down from the ceiling a black velvet handbag, all dirty and broken, and gave it to her. The woman opened it, drew out a sheet of paper and said: "Here's the marriage certificate. . . . Elvira Proietti and Ernesto Rapelli . . . do you still deny it, Ernesto Rapelli?"

I was struck by the fact that my name really *is* Ernesto. Feeling a bit troubled, I said: "But I am not called Rapelli."

"Oh no?" The little girl was singing gently, "Ernesto, Ernesto"; and the woman rose to her feet. I had guessed rightly: in spite of her grey hair and wrinkles and complete lack of teeth, it was clear that she was not more than thirty. "Ah, so you're not Rapelli?" Her hands on her hips, she came close up to me, stared at me and cried: "You *are* Rapelli. . . . Before God and man, I swear you're Rapelli."

"I understand now," I said; "I see you're not well. . . . If you don't mind, I'll go away."

"Wait a moment . . . not so fast." In the meantime the child was dancing round us in the highest delight. Sarcastically, the woman resumed: "Ernesto, the great Ernesto . . . who deserted his wife and ran away from home and hasn't been seen for a year. . . . And d'you know what we've been living on, this creature and I, during this year that you've been away?"

"I don't know," I said brusquely, "and I don't want to know. . . . Let me go."

"You tell him," she cried to the child, "you tell him what we've been living on, you tell your father."

"On charity," said the child joyfully, in a sing-song voice, coming close up to me in her turn.

I must confess I was beginning to feel seriously troubled. All these coincidences—the name of Ernesto, the fact that I too had left my home, the other fact that I too had a wife and daughter—gave me a queer feeling that I was no longer myself and yet at the same time that I was, but in a manner different from usual. Meanwhile the woman, seeing me hesitate, shouted at me, right under my nose: "You know what happens to men who desert their wives and children? Prison . . . d'you understand, you scoundrel? Prison . . ."

I began to be frightened now and, without saying anything, turned towards the door so as to go away. But there was someone looking at us from the threshold—a little thin woman, poor, yet tidily dressed. Seeing my bewilderment, she said: "Don't take any notice of her . . . she's got the idea that every man she sees is her husband . . . and that little monkey of a girl deliberately entices everyone that passes into the house, just for the fun of hearing her shouting and working herself into a frenzy. . . . You just wait till I catch you, you ugly little witch." She raised her hand as if to give the child a smack, but the latter nimbly avoided her and began dancing round me, repeating delightedly: "You believed it, didn't you? . . . you believed it . . . and you were frightened, you were frightened . . . you were frightened."

"Elvira, this isn't your husband," said the woman quietly. Immediately, as if convinced of the truth of this, Elvira went back and squatted down in a corner. The

other woman, leaving me where I was, went to the back of the hut and started raking about in a cooking-stove. "It's I who get her something to eat," she explained to me; "it's true, they live on charity, but her husband didn't run away, he's dead. . . ."

I had had enough. I took a hundred lire out of my pocketbook and gave them to the child, who took them without saying thank you. Then I left the hut and retraced my steps—along the lane to the asphalt road and then across the bridge and back to the Via Ostiense. After the heat inside the hut, coming back into my own home seemed like entering a grotto. And, although our few pieces of furniture were of a very humble kind, they were a good deal better than the nails upon which those two unfortunate creatures hung up their rags. In the kitchen the table had already been cleared; but my wife took out the cucumber salad which she had put aside for me and I ate it with some bread, watching her as she stood at the sink washing the plates and knives and forks. Then I got up and gave her a kiss, stealthily, on the back of her neck, and so we made our peace.

Some days later I told my wife the story of the hut, and then I made up my mind to go back there and see whether something could be done for the little girl. I had no fear now of being taken for Ernesto Rapelli. But would you believe it? I found neither the hut nor the woman nor the child, nor yet that other thin little woman who cooked for them. I wandered about for an hour, in blinding sunshine, amongst the heaps of rubbish, and then, defeated, went home again. I have always supposed that I must have failed to find the right way. My wife, however, says that I myself invented the story, from remorse at having thought of deserting her.

THE CLOWN

THAT winter, with the idea of leaving no kind of job untried, I took to going round the restaurants playing the guitar with a friend of mine who sang. This friend

was called Milone; he was also nicknamed "the Professor" because once upon a time he had taught Swedish gymnastics. He was a big man of about fifty, not exactly fat but solid and fleshy, with a heavy, grim-looking face and a big, massive body which was apt to make chairs creak when he sat down upon them. I played the guitar according to my own idea of it, that is, seriously, almost without moving, with eyes lowered, because I am an artist and not a buffoon; it was Milone who played the buffoon. He would begin in a casual way, standing up and leaning against a wall, his old hat pulled down over his eyes, his thumbs in the arm-holes of his waistcoat, his paunch jutting over the top of his trousers and a leather belt supporting it: he looked like a drunken man singing to the moon. Then gradually, he would warm up and—though without really singing, for he had neither voice nor ear—he would end by making a spectacle of himself, or rather, as I said, by playing the buffoon. His speciality was sentimental ballads, the most famous ones of their kind, the ones that normally move people and bring tears to their eyes; but in *his* mouth these songs were not moving at all, rather they made people laugh, because he knew how to make them appear ridiculous in a disagreeable, gloomy manner all his own. I do not know what was wrong with this man—whether perhaps in his youth some woman had treated him badly, or whether he had been born like that, with a character of the kind that takes pleasure in ridiculing fine and beautiful things. But the fact remains that he was not simply a character; no, he introduced a kind of fury into his work and it needed all the obtuseness of people employed in eating not to realize that his performance was not so much ridiculous as painful. Especially did he excel himself when it was a question of reproducing little feminine movements and tricks and grimaces. What does a woman do, does she smile coquettishly? He, under the brim of his hat, would suggest the graceless grin of a strumpet. Does she swing her hips slightly? He would start doing a *danse du ventre,* thrusting out his buttocks, as square and solid as a soldier's pack. Does she make her voice soft and sweet? He, pursing his lips, would produce a tiny, flute-like, syrupy voice which was positively nauseating. He had, in fact, no moderation, he always overdid it and became scurri-

lous and repulsive. To such a point, indeed, that often I felt ashamed, for it is one thing to accompany a singer on the guitar and another to be the partner of a clown. And then I would remember that not so long ago I had been playing these same songs, sung seriously by a fine artist; and it made me unhappy to see them cheapened in this way, and made unrecognizable and indecent. I said so to him once, when we were hurrying through the streets from one restaurant to another. "But what have women done to you?" I asked him. As usual, after he had been playing the buffoon, he was gloomy and absent-minded, as though all sorts of strange thoughts were running through his head. "To me?" he said. "They haven't done anything to me." "Why I ask," I explained, "is because you put so much passion into jeering at them." He made no answer, and that was the end of the conversation.

I should have left him if it had not been to my advantage to stay; for—though this may seem impossible—he made more money with his vulgarities than did many a fine strolling singer with his lovely songs. We went round mostly, not to the expensive restaurants, but to places that were simpler and plainer but still by no means cheap, places where people go to stuff themselves and have a good time. As soon as we came in and I, not making a sound, was taking my guitar out of its case, one single cry would go up from the crowded tables: "Ah, the Professor . . . here's the Professor. . . . Come over here, Professor." Grim-looking, goggle-eyed, perfectly at ease, sliding his feet along the floor, Milone would present himself with the remark: "At your service"; and this "at your service" was already so ridiculous, in the way he said it, that everyone would burst out laughing. In the meantime the spaghetti would be arriving; and, while the waiter was running round serving it, Milone would announce, in a silly, affected little voice: "A really beautiful ballad: *When Rosina comes down from her village. . . .* I'll be Rosina." And just imagine: those people, watching him do Rosina, with his usual gibes and his usual scurrilities, would actually pause with the spaghetti dangling from their forks, between their mouths and their plates. And they were by no means parties of butchers or people like that: they were all refined sort of people—men in dark blue suits, with oiled hair and pearl tiepins;

delicate, expensive women, with furs and plenty of jewellery. They would say to one another, while Milone was playing the clown: "He's great . . . he's really great"; or again someone would cry in alarm: "Now please don't go round telling everyone that we've discovered him . . . otherwise he'll get spoilt". Amongst his other vulgarities, Milone had one song in which, at a certain point, in order to make the character more ridiculous, he used to make a particular noise with his mouth which I shall not specify. Well, would you believe it? It was always those same charming, dainty ladies who wanted this song encored.

It must be confessed that Milone's head had been somewhat turned by all this applause. He lived in a furnished room, dark and damp, in a dressmaker's house in Via Cimarra. And now, every time I went to the house to fetch him, I used to find him standing in front of the looking-glass, trying some new disgustingness, some new piece of vulgarity. He would put a gloomy thoroughness into this rehearsal, like a great actor getting ready for a performance; and I, sitting on the bed, watching him doing a *danse du ventre* in front of the mirror that stood on the chest-of-drawers, sometimes wondered whether he was not slightly mad. "Isn't it about time," I asked him one day, "that you invented something attractive, something moving?" "You know," he replied, "you don't understand anything about it. . . . When people are eating, they want to laugh, not to be moved . . . and I," he added grimly, "make them laugh." Soon after this, owing to this same passion for perpetual improvement, he had the idea of carrying with him, in a little suitcase, a few feminine garments—for instance a small hat, a scarf, a petticoat—to be put on on the spot, in order to make his parodies even funnier. This love of dressing up as a woman was, in him, almost a mania; and I cannot express how painful it was to see him flouncing about with the little hat down to his eyes and the petticoat fastened to his belt, over his trousers. In the end, unable to think up any more tricks, he wanted me to play the buffoon too, while I was twanging the strings of my guitar. But this I refused to do.

We went round as many restaurants as we could, between twelve and three o'clock and between eight and midnight. We took them by groups, according to days:

one time the restaurants in the neighbourhood of the Piazza di Spagna; one time those round the Piazza Venezia; then the ones in the Trastevere district; and then those near the station. We did not speak as we hurried through the streets from one restaurant to another: there was no real intimacy between us. When we had finished our round, we would go into a wine-shop and share out the money. Then, in silence, I would smoke a cigarette and Milone would drink a quarter of wine. In the afternoon, Milone used to try out his turns in front of the looking-glass; while I would either sleep or go to the pictures.

One evening when the *tramontana* was blowing, after we had gone round the Trastevere restaurants we went into a wine-shop behind the Piazza Mastai, more with the idea of warming ourselves than of giving a performance. It was a long, narrow room, almost a passage, with a row of tables along the wall, and, at the tables, poor people for the most part, drinking the landlord's wine and eating things wrapped up in newspapers. It must have been vanity—since it could not have been interest—that encouraged Milone to make an exhibition of himself in a wine-shop of that kind. Anyhow, he chose one of the most beautiful of his songs, and, by his usual system of sneers and contortions, reduced it to a piece of muck. When he had finished, there was some very chilly applause, and then, from one of the tables, a voice said: "Now *I'll* sing it for you."

I turned and saw, walking towards me, a fair-haired young man in mechanic's overalls, handsome as an angel, who was casting furious glances at Milone as though he were ready to eat him. "Strike up," he said to me with authority, "and begin again right from the beginning." Milone, intimidated, pretended to be tired and dropped into a chair by the door. The young man signalled to me to start and then began to sing. I am not saying that he sang quite like a real singer, but he sang with feeling, in a fine, warm, smooth voice; he sang, in fact, as one ought to sing, and as the song demanded to be sung. Moreover, as I said before, he was very handsome, with those curls of his, especially when compared with Milone, so massive and so dreary-looking. He turned towards the interior of the wine-shop as he sang, gazing at a table where a girl was sitting by herself, as though he were

singing for her. When he had finished, he made a gesture with his outstretched hand towards Milone, as much as to say: "That's the way to sing"; and then went back to the table and the waiting girl—who immediately threw her arms round his neck. In the wine-shop, to tell the truth, they applauded him even less than Milone, and none of them had understood why he should have bothered to sing at all. But I had understood; and Milone had understood too.

While I was playing, I had looked frequently at Milone; and I had seen him, several times, pass his hand across his face and under the hair that hung down over his forehead, like someone who is trying hard to keep awake when really he is dropping with sleep. But he did not succeed in concealing a bitter expression which I had never seen on his face before; and each time the young man started on a new verse, this bitterness seemed to increase. At last he rose to his feet, stretching himself and pretending to yawn, and said: "Well, well, it's time to go home to bed . . . I'm terribly sleepy. . . ."

We parted at the corner of the street, making the customary appointment for next day. What then happened during the night, I reconstructed afterwards; but it is all a matter of supposition. I have said that Milone's head had been turned, and that he believed himself to be a great artist of some kind whereas in reality he was just a poor wretch who played the buffoon to amuse people while they were eating; so much the greater, therefore, was the fall brought about by that gesture on the part of the fair-haired young man in overalls. I think that, while the young man was singing, he must have seen himself, all of a sudden, not as he had hitherto believed himself to be, but as he really was—a clumsy, big man of fifty who put on a bib and recited nursery poems. But I also think he must have realized that he would never be able to sing, even if he made a pact with the devil. All he could do, in fact, was to make people laugh; and the only way he was able to make them laugh was by holding certain things up to ridicule. And those things, it so happened, were just the things he had never succeeded in having in his own life.

But, as I said, it is all a matter of supposition. The only thing certain is that the dressmaker, whose lodger

he was, found him next day hanging between the window and the curtain, in the place where the canary's cage usually hangs. Passers-by in the Via Cimarra noticed him, when they looked through the window and saw a pair of legs and feet dangling in the air. Spiteful, like all suicides, he had locked the door and placed the chest-of-drawers against it, with the looking-glass on top: possibly he wanted to watch himself, as he did when rehearsing his turns, in the act of putting his head into the noose. Anyhow, they had to break down the door, and the looking-glass fell and was smashed. When they took him to bury him I was the onlv one who went with him, without my guitar this time. The dressmaker had to replace the looking-glass; but she consoled herself by selling the rope, at so much a piece.

THE LORRY-DRIVER

I AM lean and nervous, with thin arms and long legs, and my belly is so flat that my trousers keep slipping down: in fact I am exactly the opposite of what is required to make a good lorry-driver. Have you ever looked at lorry-drivers? They are all big chaps with broad shoulders, brawny arms, strong backs and bellies. For a lorry-driver depends especially on his arms, his back and his belly: on his arms, for turning the steering-wheel which, in a lorry, has a diameter very nearly as long as an arm, and which sometimes, on the bends of a mountain road, has to be turned full circle; on his back, to stand up to the fatigue of sitting for hours and hours, always in the same position, without beginning to ache or grow stiff; and finally on his belly, to keep him planted solidly in his seat, like a rock embedded in the earth. So much for the physical aspect. From the moral point of view I am even less suitable. The lorry-driver should have no nerves, no caprices, no homesickness, nor any other delicate feelings: driving is exasperating and fatiguing enough to kill an ox. And with regard to

women, the lorry-driver, like the sailor, should think very little about them; otherwise, with that continuous coming and going, he would go completely crazy. But I myself am full of thoughts and preoccupations; I am melancholy by nature; and I like women.

However, in spite of its not being the right job for me, I wanted to be a lorry-driver and managed to get myself taken on by a transport company. As mate they gave me a chap called Palombi, who was, it must be admitted, a real lout. He was indeed the perfect lorry-driver—not that lorry-drivers are not often intelligent; but *he* had the good fortune to be stupid, so that he formed one single piece with his lorry. In spite of the fact that he was a man of over thirty, there was still something of the overgrown boy about him: he had a heavy face and rounded cheeks, small eyes beneath a low forehead, and a slit of a mouth like the opening in a money-box. He spoke little, in fact hardly at all, and preferably by means of grunts. His intelligence brightened only when there was a question of something to eat. I remember one occasion when, tired and hungry, we went into an inn at Itri, on the road to Naples. There was nothing to eat except beans cooked with bacon rind, and I scarcely touched them because they don't agree with me. Palombi devoured two bowls full; then, pulling himself back in his chair, he gazed at me solemnly for a moment, as though he were about to tell me something of importance. Finally, passing his hand across his stomach, he declared: "I could have eaten another four platefuls." This was the great thought that had taken so long to find expression.

With this companion, who might have been made of wood, I don't need to tell you how pleased I was the first time we came across Italia. At that time we were doing the Rome-Naples journey, carrying all kinds of different loads—bricks, scrap-iron, rolls of newsprint, timber, fruit, and even, occasionally, small flocks of sheep that were being taken from one pasture to another. Italia stopped us at Terracina and asked for a lift to Rome. Our orders were not to give lifts to anybody, but, after we had taken a look at her, we decided that, for this once, the rule didn't hold good. We beckoned to her to get in and she

hopped up, as brisk as could be, saying: "Three cheers for the lorry-drivers! They're always so kind."

Italia was a provoking girl: there is no other word for it. She had an incredibly long, narrow waist, and, above it, a bust that stood out sharply—positively venomous, it was—under the tight jumpers she usually wore, which came down to her hips. She had a long neck, too, and a small, brown head and two large green eyes. In contrast to her very long body, her legs were short and rather crooked, so that she gave the impression of walking with her knees bent. She was not beautiful, in fact, but she had something better than beauty; and I had proof of this during that first trip, for, when we had got as far as Cisterna and Palombi was driving, she slipped her hand into mine and squeezed it hard, and never let go of it till Velletri, when I took over from Palombi. It was summer, and about four o'clock in the afternoon, which is the hottest time, and our two hands were all slippery with sweat; but every now and then she threw me a glance out of those green, gipsy eyes of hers and it seemed to me that life, after being for such a long time nothing more than a ribbon of asphalt, was beginning to smile upon me once more. I had found what I had been looking for—a woman to think about. Between Cisterna and Velletri, Palombi stopped and got out in order to go and look at the wheels, and I took advantage of this to give her a kiss. At Velletri I willingly changed places with Palombi: a clasp of the hand and a kiss were enough for me, for that day.

From then onwards, regularly once or even twice a week, Italia got us to take her from Rome to Terracina and back. She would wait for us in the morning, always with some sort of parcel or suitcase, near the walls; and then, if Palombi was driving, she would hold my hand all the way to Terracina. On our return from Naples, she would be waiting for us at Terracina; she would get in, and the hand-clasps would begin again and also—even when she was unwilling—the secret kisses at moments when Palombi could not see us. In short, I fell seriously in love, partly because it was such a long time since I had been fond of any woman and I had lost the habit. And to such a point that all she had to do now was to look at me in a certain way and immediately I was moved, like a child,

even to tears. They were tears of tenderness; but to me they appeared a weakness unworthy of a man and I made great efforts, unsuccessfully, to check them. While I was driving we would talk in low voices, taking advantage of Palombi being asleep. I do not remember anything of what we said—which shows it was mere trifles and jokes and lovers' talk. I do remember, however, that the time passed quickly: even the asphalt ribbon from Terracina, which usually seems to go on for ever, fell away as if by magic. I used to slow down to twenty or fifteen miles an hour, allowing everything to pass me—even the farm carts, almost: in time, however, we would reach the end of the journey and Italia would get out. At night it was even better: the lorry seemed to go forward almost by itself, while I drove with one hand on the wheel and the other round Italia's waist. When, in the distant darkness, the headlights of other cars went on and off, I felt like answering their signals by flashing out with my own lights some word that should let everyone know how happy I was. Something like "I love Italia and Italia loves me".

As for Palombi, either he noticed nothing or he pretended not to notice. In point of fact he never protested, even once, against these very frequent journeys of Italia's. When she got in he would give her a grunt by way of greeting, then move aside to let her sit down. She always sat in the middle, because I had to keep an eye on the road and inform Palombi, when it was a question of overtaking another vehicle, whether the road was free. Palombi did not protest even when I, in my infatuation, wanted to write something that should refer to Italia on the glass of the windscreen. I thought it over and then wrote, in white letters: "Viva l'Italia". But Palombi was so stupid that he never noticed the double meaning of the words, until some other lorry-drivers jokingly asked us why in the world we had turned so patriotic. Only then, looking at me open-mouthed, a smile slowly dawning on his face, did he say: "They think it's Italy and it's really the girl. . . . You're a clever one, that was a bright idea of yours."

All this went on for a couple of months or perhaps even longer. Then one day, after we had left Italia, as usual, at Terracina, and had gone on to Naples, we received orders to unload and go back at once to Rome,

instead of staying the night in Naples. I was annoyed, because we had an appointment with Italia for next morning; but those were the orders. I took the wheel and Palombi immediately began to snore. All went well as far as Itri, because the road is full of bends, and at night, when a lorry-driver is beginning to get tired, bends make him keep his eyes open and are his best friend. But after Itri, going through the orange-groves at Fondi, I began to grow sleepy, and, in order to keep awake, set myself to think about Italia. However, as I thought about her, it seemed to me that my thoughts were forming a thicker and thicker tangle in my mind, like the branches in a wood that becomes steadily denser and in the end quite dark. I remember saying to myself, all of a sudden: "It's lucky for me that I have the thought of her to keep me awake . . . otherwise I'd be asleep by now." Of course I *was* already asleep, and I formed this thought in my mind not while awake but in my sleep, and it was a thought sent to me in my sleep to make me sleep better and with more complete abandonment. At the same moment I felt the lorry leave the road and plunge into the ditch; and I heard, behind me, the crash and jolt of the trailer turning over. We were going slowly and therefore were not hurt; but, once we had managed to get out, we saw that the trailer was upside down with its wheels in the air and that the entire load, consisting of tanned hides, was lying in heaps in the ditch. It was dark, there was no moon, but the sky was full of stars. As luck would have it, we were almost at Terracina: there was the steep hill on our right and, on our left, beyond the vineyards, the quiet, black sea.

Palombi merely said: "Now you've done it"; and then, adding that we must get help from Terracina, started off on foot. It was a very short distance, but, seeing that we were just outside Terracina, Palombi, who was always thinking about eating, said he was hungry and that, as it would be some hours before the breakdown lorry with the crane arrived, we might as well go to an inn. So we went into the town and started looking for one. But it was after midnight, and in that round piazza, full of gaps from the bombings it had suffered, there was only one café, and that, moreover, was just closing. We turned down a small street that appeared to lead to-

wards the sea and, a little way along it, saw a lamp and a sign above a door. We hastened our steps, our hopes rising, and it was indeed an inn; but the roller-blind was half down, as though it were on the point of closing. It had glass doors, and the roller-blind left a strip of the glass uncovered, so that we were able to peep in. "You can see it's closed," said Palombi, stooping down to have a look. I stooped down too. We could see a big room, like that of a country inn, with a few tables and a counter. The chairs were all placed upside down on the tables; and there was Italia, armed with a broom, bustling about doing the cleaning, a big duster tied round her hips. And behind the counter, right at the back of the room, stood a hunchback. I have seen hunchbacks before, but never so perfect a one as this. His face framed between his hands, his hump higher than his head, he was staring at Italia with ugly, black, bilious eyes. She was nimbly sweeping the floor, then the hunchback said something or other to her, without moving, and she went over to him, leant the broom against the counter, placed her arm round his neck and gave him a long, warm kiss. Then she took up her broom again and went twirling about the room as though she were dancing. The hunchback came down from the counter into the middle of the room; and we could now see that he was a kind of seafaring hunchback, with sandals and fisherman's trousers of blue cloth, turned up at the bottom, and an open-necked shirt *à la* Robespierre. He came over to the door, and we both of us drew back, as though with the same thought. The hunchback opened the glass door and pulled down the blind from inside.

"Who would ever have thought it?" I said, to hide my agitation; and Palombi answered: "Yes," with a bitterness that surprised me. We went to the garage, and then spent the night getting the lorry back on to the road and loading up all those hides. But at dawn, as we were coming down towards Rome, Palombi began talking—for the first time, one might say, since I had known him. "You saw," he said, "what that bitch Italia has done to me?"

"What d'you mean?" I replied in astonishment.

"After all the things she'd said to me," he went on, in his slow, dull manner, "after she'd held my hand all the time while we were going up and down and I'd told her I

wanted to marry her and in fact we were more or less engaged—well, you saw? A hunchback."

His words took my breath away and I did not say anything. Palombi went on: "I'd given her such a lot of nice presents—a coral necklace, a silk scarf, a pair of patent-leather shoes. . . . I'm telling you the truth, I was really fond of her, and besides, she was just the right girl for me. . . . She's an ungrateful, heartless bitch, that's what she is. . . ."

He went on like this for some time, speaking slowly and as though to himself, in that pale dawn light, as we rattled along towards Rome. And so—I couldn't help thinking—Italia had fooled both of us, just in order to save railway tickets. It irritated me to hear Palombi speaking, because he was saying the same things that I myself might have said, and also because in *his* mouth, seeing that he was almost incapable of speech, these things sounded ridiculous. So much so, that, all of a sudden, I said to him brutally: "For God's sake stop talking to me about that bag of bones . . . I want to go to sleep." He, poor chap, answered: "Some things hurt, all the same, you know"; and then he was silent all the way to Rome.

For several months, after that, he was sad all the time; and for me, the road had gone back to what it had been before—a road without beginning or end, just a cheerless ribbon of asphalt that had to be swallowed and spewed out again twice a day. What finally persuaded me to change my job, however, was that Italia opened a wineshop right on the Naples road, calling it "The Lorry-drivers' Resort". A fine resort indeed, worth going hundreds of miles to visit! Naturally we never stopped there, but, all the same, seeing Italia behind the counter and the hunchback passing glasses and bottles of beer to her was painful to me. I took myself off. The lorry, with "Viva l'Italia" on the windscreen and Palombi at the wheel, is still on the road.

POOR FISH

PEOPLE never know very much about who they are, nor about who is inferior to them and who superior. As for me, I went too far in the direction of thinking myself inferior to everybody. It is true that I was not born with a frame as tough as iron; about as tough as earthenware, let us say. But I looked upon myself as being as fragile as glass, as the thinnest glass, in fact; and that was altogether too much. That was debasing myself too far. I used often to say to myself: now let's run over our own qualities. Physical strength, then—nil: I am small, crooked, rickety, my arms and legs are like sticks, I'm like a spider. Intelligence—very little above nil, considering that I've never managed, out of all the jobs there are, to rise above that of dish-washer in an hotel. Looks—less than nil: I have a narrow, yellow face, eyes of an indefinite, dirty colour, and a nose that seems to have been made for a face twice as broad as mine; it is big and long, and looks as if it was going straight down, and then, at the tip, it turns up like a lizard raising its snout. Other qualities, such as courage, quickness, personal charm, likeableness—the less said about them the better. Quite naturally, then, after coming to such conclusions, I was careful not to make advances to women. The only one I ever attempted to approach—a housemaid in the hotel—put me in my place with a very suitable word—"you poor fish", she said. And so I became gradually convinced that I was worth nothing at all and that the best thing for me to do was to keep quiet, in a corner, so as not to get in anybody's way.

Anyone passing along the street at the back of the Rome hotel where I work, during the early hours of the afternoon, can see a row of windows open at ground level, with a strong smell of washing-up coming from them. If his eyes can pierce the gloom, he will also see piles and piles of plates towering up to the ceiling, on tables and on the marble slab of the sink. Well, that was

my corner, the corner of the world I had chosen so as not to be conspicuous. But what a queer thing fate is: the last thing I should have expected was that, in that corner, in that very kitchen, I mean, somebody should come and catch me by surprise and pluck me like a flower that has been hidden in the grass. Ida, it was, Ida, the new scullery-maid who took Giuditta's place when she was going to have a baby. Ida, among women, was just what I was among men: a poor fish. Like me, she was small and twisted, scraggy, insignificant. But she was passionate, restless, gay, a devil. We quickly became friends, owing to the fact that we stood in front of the same dishes and the same greasy water; and then, one thing leading to another, she prevailed upon me to invite her one Sunday to go to the cinema. I invited her out of politeness; and I was surprised when, in the darkness of the cinema, she took my hand, slipping her five fingers in between mine. I thought there was some mistake and even tried to free myself, but she whispered to me to stay still: what harm could there be in holding hands? Then, as we came out, she explained to me that she had been noticing me for some time, from the very day, it might even be said, that she had been taken on at the hotel. That, ever since then, she had done nothing but think about me. That she hoped, now, that I was a little fond of her, because she, for her part, could not live without me. It was the first time that a woman, even a woman like Ida, had said things like this to me, and I lost my head. I gave her all the answers she wanted, and a great deal more as well.

But I still felt profoundly astonished, and although she went on repeating that she was mad about me, I failed to be convinced. And so, on other occasions, when we went out together, I couldn't keep from harping on the subject, partly for the pleasure of hearing her say it again, and partly because I found it hard to believe. "Now do tell me, I *should* like to know what it is you see in me? How *do* you manage to love me?" And would you believe it? Ida used to cling on to my arm with both hands, raise an adoring face towards me, and answer: "I love you because you have *all* the good qualities . . . for me you're just living perfection." Incredulously I would repeat: "*All* the good qualities? Well, I never knew that before."

"Yes, *all*. . . . To begin with, you're so good-looking." I couldn't help laughing, I must confess, and I said: "*Me* good-looking? but have you taken a proper look at me?" "Yes, indeed I have. . . . I'm doing it all the time." "But what about my nose? Have you ever looked at my nose?" "It's just your nose that I like," she answered; and then, taking hold of my nose between two fingers and shaking it like a bell, "Nose, nose," she went on, "for this nose I don't know what I wouldn't do." Then she added: "Besides, you're so intelligent." "*Me* intelligent? Why, everyone says I'm an idiot." "They say it out of envy," she replied, with feminine logic, "but you *are* intelligent, extremely intelligent. . . . When you talk, I listen to you open-mouthed. . . . You're the most intelligent person I've ever met." "Well, anyhow," I resumed after a moment, "you won't say I'm strong . . . that you *can't* say." And she answered, with passion: "Yes, you *are* strong . . . very, very strong." This took a little swallowing, and for a moment I was left speechless. Then she started off again: "And besides, if you really want to know, you've got something about you that I just love." So I asked her: "But what is this 'something', I should like to know?" "I don't quite know how to explain," she replied; "it's your voice, your expression, the way you move. . . . Certainly nobody else has got what you have." Naturally, for some time I did not believe her; and I used to make her repeat these speeches to me, simply because it amused me to compare them with what I had always thought about myself. But, as the days went by, I began, I must admit, to get ideas into my head. "Suppose it was really true?" I sometimes said to myself. Not that I really believed that I was any different, essentially, from what I had always thought I was. But Ida's remark about the "something" left me in doubt. In that remark, I felt, lay the explanation of the mystery. On account of that "something", I knew, women liked hunchbacks, dwarfs, old men, even monsters. Why shouldn't somebody like me too? I was neither a hunchback, a dwarf, an old man or a monster.

About this time Ida and I decided to go and see a circus which had pitched its tents opposite the Passeggiata Archeologica. We were both of us feeling very cheerful; and, once inside the big tent, we took our places

in the cheap seats, cuddling very close together, arm in arm. Beside me was a tall, fair woman, young and handsome, and with her, one seat farther on, a dark young man, big and strong too, a tough, athletic-looking type. I thought of them as what is called "a handsome pair"; and then I thought no more of them and gave all my attention to the circus. The yellow-sanded arena was still empty, but at the far end there was a platform with a band of red uniforms, entirely of brass instruments and flutes, that never stopped playing warlike marches, one after another. At last four clowns came in, two of them dwarfs and two bigger, with whitened faces and large loose trousers, and they cut capers and made jokes, slapping and kicking each other, and Ida laughed so much that she started coughing. Then the band struck up a lively march and it was the turn of the horses—six in all, three dappled grey and three white—which started circling round the ring, as good as could be, while their trainer, all dressed in red and gold, stood in the middle of the arena and cracked his long whip. A woman in a tulle skirt and white tights came dancing in, took hold of the saddle of one of the horses and ran beside it, mounting and dismounting, up and down, while the horses still went round and round, first at a trot and then at a gallop. When the horses had gone, the clowns came back and turned somersaults and kicked each other's behinds, and then came a family of trapezists, father, mother and their little boy, all three wearing blue tights, and all three very muscular, especially the boy. They clapped their hands and then, houp la! up a knotted rope they climbed, up and up, right to the roof of the tent. There they began to send the trapezes flying backwards and forwards, hanging on now with their hands and now with their feet and throwing the little boy to each other like a ball. Filled with admiration, I said to Ida: "Look at that! How I should like to be a trapezist! I should like to launch myself into the air and then catch hold of the trapeze with my legs!" Ida, in her usual way, nestled up close beside me and answered in a tone of adoration: "It's all a matter of practice. . . . If you practised, you could do it too." The fair woman looked at us and whispered something to her companion, and they both started laughing. After the trapezists came the

number one attraction—the lions. A number of young men in red tail-coats came in and rolled up the carpet used by the trapezists. As they carried it away, without noticing they rolled up one of the clowns inside it; and again Ida, seeing his white face poking out of the roll of carpet, almost fell off her chair with laughing. Very nimbly and quickly the young men put up a big nickelled cage in the middle of the arena, and then, to a roll of drums, the great blond head of the first lion appeared through a little door. There entered, in all, five of them, as well as a lioness who looked thoroughly ill-tempered and at once began to roar. Last of all came the lion-tamer, an agreeable, ceremonious little man in a green coat with gold braid on it, who at once started bowing to the public, waving a riding-master's whip in one hand and in the other a stick with a hook on the end, like the ones they use for pulling down the roller-blinds of shops. The lions went circling round him, roaring; he went on bowing, calmly and smilingly; then at last he turned towards them, and, by poking them in the backside with the hook, forced them to climb up, one after another, on to some little stools—really quite small ones—which were arranged in a row at the back of the cage. The lions, cowering, poor beasts, on top of these cat-sized seats, roared and showed their teeth; two or three of them, as the trainer passed within range, put out a paw in his direction, which he avoided with a pirouette. "What if they eat him?" Ida whispered to me, clinging to my arm. There was a roll of drums; the trainer went up to one of the lions which was older than the rest and which looked three-quarters asleep and was not roaring, opened its mouth and put his head inside, three times in succession. I said to Ida, amid the bursts of applause which followed: "You won't believe me . . . but I should just love to go into that cage and put my head in the lion's mouth too." Filled with admiration, and cuddling up against me, she replied: "I know you'd be quite capable of it." At these words, the fair young woman and the athletic young man burst out laughing, looking significantly at us. This time we could not ignore the fact that they were laughing at us, and Ida grew angry and muttered to me: "They're laughing at *us*. . . . Why don't you tell them how rude they are?" But at that moment a bell rang and

everyone got up, while the lions went off with their heads down, through the usual little door. The first part of the show was over.

As we left the tent the other two were walking in front of us. Ida went on doggedly whispering to me: "You've got to tell them how rude they are . . . if you don't, you're a coward"; and I, piqued in my pride, made up my mind to accost them. Outside the big tent, and in the shelter of it, was a shed where you could pay extra to visit the zoo belonging to the circus: it contained a row of cages on one side, with the wild animals, and on the other a space with straw on the floor where the tame ones were kept loose—that is to say, zebras, elephants, horses and dogs. It was almost dark inside the shed, but, as we came in, we could see, in the gloom, the other two standing in front of the bear's cage. The fair woman was leaning forward to look at the bear, which was curled up, fast asleep, its furry back against the bars; and the man was pulling her away by the arm. I went straight up to the man and said in a firm voice: "Tell me . . . were you laughing at us?"

He turned slightly and answered without hesitation: "No, we were laughing at a frog pretending to be an ox."

"The frog, I suppose, being *me?*"

"If the cap fits, wear it."

Ida was pushing me forward with her hand on my arm. Raising my voice, I replied: "You know what you are? You're just an ignorant cad."

He retorted, brutally: "Ah, so the frog's beginning to croak now, is he?"

At this, the woman started to laugh, and Ida, hissing like a viper, broke in: "There's nothing to laugh at . . . instead of laughing, you'd better stop rubbing yourself up against my husband. . . . I suppose you think I didn't see you. . . . You've been rubbing your arm up against him the whole time."

I was astonished, because I hadn't noticed it: at most, since she was sitting beside me, she might have perhaps just touched me with her elbow. Indeed she answered indignantly: "My dear girl, you're crazy. . . ."

"No, I'm not crazy; I saw you rubbing up against him."

"But why d'you think I should worry about a poor fish like your husband?" she spoke now with the utmost

scorn. "If I had to rub up against anyone, I should choose a real man. . . . Here's a real man for you." As she said this she took hold of her boy friend's arm as a pork-butcher might take up a ham to show it off to a customer. "This is the arm *I*'d rub up against. . . . Look what muscles . . . look how strong he is."

And now, in turn, the man came up to me and said threateningly: "That's enough . . . get along with you . . . better for you if you do."

"Who says so?" I cried in exasperation, raising myself on tiptoe to be on a level with him.

The scene that followed I shall remember as long as I live. He made no reply to my remark, but, all of a sudden, took me under the arms and lifted me up in the air like a feather. On the other side from the cages, as I have said, there was a straw-covered space where the tame animals were kept. Just behind us there was a family of elephants—father, mother, and baby, the latter comparatively small but still about the size of a horse. They were standing in a dark corner, poor creatures, with drooping ears and trunks, with their huge dark rumps pressed close together. And so he lifted me up, this great bully, and suddenly dumped me down on the back of the smallest elephant. The animal perhaps thought the moment had come for it to go into the circus-ring, and started trotting, with me on its back, along the gangway beside the cages. People rushed in all directions, Ida was running along behind me, screaming, and I, after sitting astride the little elephant and trying in vain to snatch hold of it by the ears, when we reached the end of the gangway, slipped off and fell to the ground, hitting the back of my head. What happened then, I don't know, because I fainted, and when I came round I found myself at the First Aid post, with Ida sitting beside me holding my hand. Later, as soon as I felt better, we went home without seeing the second part of the show.

Next day I said to Ida: "It was your fault . . . you put such ideas into my head, making me think I was goodness knows what. . . . But that woman was perfectly right: I'm just a poor fish and nothing more."

But Ida, taking me by the arm and gazing at me, "You were magnificent," she said. "*He* was frightened, and that was why he put you on to the elephant. . . . And

then, riding along on the elephant, you looked really splendid. . . . It was a pity you fell off."

So there was nothing to be done. For her I was one thing, for other people, another. But can you ever tell what women see, when they're in love?

THE GO-BETWEEN

AS we were going up the great staircase of the palace, Antonio, the butler, warned me: "Don't imagine you'll get much out of the Princess, she's so mean you wouldn't believe it. . . . Ever since her husband died, she's had a passion for interfering in the management of everything, and she won't leave anyone in peace."

"But why . . . is she old?" I asked casually.

"She—old? No, she's young and beautiful. . . . She can't be more than twenty-five or so. . . . To look at her, you'd think she was an angel. . . . But appearances are deceptive."

"Well," I replied, "she can look like a devil, for all I care. All I want is the money that's due to me. . . . I'm a house agent, the Princess has an apartment to sell, I sell it for her, I take my commission and that's that."

"Ah, it's not as simple as that . . . she'll make you sweat blood. . . . Now wait while I go and tell her you're here."

He left me in the anteroom and went to find the Princess, whom he called "Excellency", as though she were a man. I waited for some time in the icy anteroom, typical of an ancient palace, with its tapestry-hung walls and frescoed ceiling. At last Antonio came and told me that Her Excellency was ready for me. We went through a suite of reception-rooms and then, in a room larger than the others, I saw, in a window embrasure, a desk and the Princess herself sitting writing. Antonio went over to her, respectfully, and said: "Here is Signor Proietti, Excellency." Without raising her eyes, she answered: "Come in, Proietti." As I came close to her, I was able

to examine her at my leisure and was at once forced to admit that Antonio had not exaggerated when he compared her to an angel. She had a pure, pale, delicate, sweet face, with black hair and long black eyelashes that shadowed her cheeks. Her nose, slightly turned up, was slender and transparent, as though accustomed to smelling nothing but perfumes. Her mouth was small, the upper lip bigger than the lower, like a rose. I lowered my glance to her figure: she was dressed in black, with a close-fitting jacket; broad in the hips and bosom, she had a wasp waist, so small that you could have put your two hands round it. She was writing: and I noticed that her hand was white, thin and elegant, with a diamond ring on the forefinger. Then she looked up at me and I saw that her eyes were extremely beautiful—enormous, dark, at the same time both velvety and liquid. "Well then, Proietti," she said, "shall we go and look at the apartment?"

She had a soft, caressing voice. "Yes, Princess," I stammered.

"Come then, Proietti, this way," she said, taking up a big iron key.

We went back through the same series of reception-rooms, and in the anteroom she said to Antonio, as he moved forward to open the door for her: "Antonio, tell the people who look after the heating not to put on any more coal. . . . The heat in here is stifling"; and I was astonished, because the anteroom was icy and so were all the other rooms. We started off up the main staircase, she in front and I behind, and as she walked ahead I could see that her figure, too, was very beautiful—tall and slim, with straight legs; and the black dress emphasized the whiteness of her neck and hands. We went up two flights of the main staircase and then two more flights of a back staircase, and finally, at the far end of a garret, reached the iron corkscrew stairs that led up to the apartment. She clambered up this little staircase and I followed behind, lowering my eyes because I knew I could have looked at her legs and I did not wish to do so, and already I respected her as one respects a woman one loves. We came into the apartment, which consisted, as I at once saw, of two big rooms with brick-paved floors and windows with fixed shutters open only at the top, right under the ceiling, so that you could see nothing but the sky. A

third, smaller room, circular in shape, had been devised inside a belvedere tower, and gave, through a french window, on to a balcony with a railing which hung over a wide expanse of brown-tiled roof. She opened the french window and went out on to the balcony, saying: "Come, Proietti, come and see what a view there is." And indeed there was a fine panorama: from that balcony you could see the whole of Rome, with its endless roofs and domes and towers. It was a clear day, and, far away against the blue sky, between one roof and another, you could see the great dome of St. Peter's. I looked idly at the view, but in truth I hardly saw it and thought only of her, as though she were something that preoccupied me and that I could not forget. She, in the meantime, had gone in again; and I swung round and asked her, automatically: "How about the conveniences?"

"You'd like to see the bathroom? Here it is." And she went to a small door that I had not noticed and showed me a little low, square, windowless room which she had converted into a bathroom. I was able to see at a glance that the fittings were of a cheap kind, the sort of thing you see in a working-class house. She closed the bathroom door again and, stopping in the middle of the big room, her hands in her jacket pockets, asked me: "Well, Proietti, how much d'you think we can ask?"

I was so much preoccupied with her beauty and with the disturbing fact of finding myself alone with her in this garret, that for a moment, as I stood looking at her, I made no answer. She perhaps became aware of what was passing through my head, for, tapping the floor with a small, nervous foot, she added: "May I ask what you are thinking about?"

I said hastily: "I was calculating. . . . There are three rooms . . . but no lift, and whoever buys it will have to do it up. . . . I suggest three and a half million lire."

"But, Proietti," she immediately exclaimed, raising her voice, "Proietti, I intended to ask seven million!"

To tell the truth, for a moment I was stupefied. This combination of beauty and spurious business acumen was disconcerting. Finally I stammered: "Princess, at seven million no one will take it."

"But this isn't the Parioli district," she replied. "This is a historic palace. . . . This is the centre of Rome."

Well, we discussed the matter for some time, she standing in the middle of the room and I at a safe distance from her, so as not to be led into temptation. I talked and talked, but in reality I was only thinking about *her*, and—since it was all I could do—I devoured her with my eyes. In the end she allowed herself, very unwillingly, to be convinced that four million was all she could ask, though this was already a high price. As a matter of fact, allowing a million lire for the necessary work to be done, and adding on taxes and other things, the apartment would ultimately cost the buyer almost six million. I already had a possible client, so I told her the matter could be considered settled, and left the house.

Next day I presented myself at the palace with a young architect who was looking for just such an unusual and picturesque place. The Princess took her key and showed us over the apartment. The architect argued a little about the price but in the end agreed to the sum already fixed —four million lire.

Early the following morning, however—it wasn't even eight o'clock—my wife came and woke me up, telling me that the Princess was on the telephone. I was so sleepy I could hardly see; but her voice, her sweet, delicate voice, seemed to me like music as she spoke. I listened to this music in my pyjamas, standing bare-footed on the floor, while my wife knelt down to put my slippers on my feet, and then threw an overcoat over my shoulders. I understood little or nothing of what the Princess was saying, but, amongst her flood of words, two, all of a sudden, struck me: ". . . Five million."

I said at once: "Princess, we've pledged ourselves for four million . . . we can't go back on that. . . ."

"In business there's no such thing as a pledge. . . . It's five million or nothing."

"But, Princess, he'll back out of it. . . ."

"Don't be a damned fool, Proietti. . . . Five million or nothing."

To tell the truth, the words "damned fool", when pronounced by that voice, did not seem to me either vulgar or insulting but almost a compliment. I said I would do as she wished, and immediately afterwards telephoned my client and told him the new figure. I heard him exclaim at

once, at the other end of the wire: "Are you people having a joke? The price goes up by a million in one day!"

"I can't help it . . . those are my orders."

"Well, I'll see. . . . I'll think about it."

"Then you'll let me know . . . ?"

"Yes, I'll think about it, I'll see."

That, naturally, was the last of *him*. And then began what was, so to speak, the most intimate period of my relations with the Princess. She telephoned me, on an average, three times a day, and, each time my wife called out ironically: "It's the usual princess," I was as excited as if it had been a telephone-call between lovers. Far from it. She loved money to an extent that was hardly believable; she was mercenary, mean, pig-headed, cunning—worse than a usurer. It must be confessed that she had a money-box in place of a heart: she saw nothing and she thought of nothing but money. Every day now, on the telephone, she invented some new pretext for raising the price, even if it was only by a trifle of five or ten thousand lire. One day it would be the bathroom, in order to recompense herself for plumbing expenses, next day it would be the view, another day the fact that the bus stopped right in front of the main door of the palace, and so on. But I held fast to the figure of five million, which was already enormous; so much so that possible buyers, as soon as they heard it, vanished and were never seen again. At last, by a lucky chance, I found her someone who really fell in love with the place—a business man from Milan who wanted to put a girl friend of his into it. He was a curt, practical man who knew the market and the value of money: a middle-aged man, tall, with a long, brown face and a mouth full of gold teeth. He came to see the apartment, examined everything carefully and then said to the Princess, without much ceremony: "It's nothing but a mouse's nest, and in Milan we'd put in water and use it as a laundry. . . . If it's worth five million, I'm a Dutchman. . . . By the time I've done the necessary alterations, such as renewing the floors and the fixtures, putting in windows, getting rid of this cheap stuff"—and he pointed to the porcelain fittings in the bathroom—"it will cost me seven or eight millions. . . . Never mind. . . . The law of the market is ruled by supply and demand. . . . You've

met the person who really wants this apartment, so you're quite right."

But he did wrong to talk in this frank, brutal, business-like way. For, as soon as he had gone, she said to me sorrowfully: "Proietti, we've made an enormous mistake."

"What?"

"In asking only five million . . . that man would have paid seven."

"Princess," I answered, "I'm afraid you didn't quite understand his type: he's a man who's full of money, it's true, and he's very fond of his mistress, I don't doubt; but he'll never give more than that much."

"You don't know what a man cannot do for a woman he loves," said she, looking at me with those wonderfully beautiful eyes in which there was nothing at all except greed and money. I became confused, and replied: "It may be so . . . but I'm convinced I'm right."

Well, next day the Milanese business man presented himself at the palace with a lawyer, and the Princess, as soon as we were seated, said at once: "Signor Casiraghi, I'm sorry, but, on thinking it over, I cannot accept the figure I mentioned yesterday."

"How d'you mean?"

"I mean that I want six million."

You should have seen Casiraghi. With great simplicity he rose to his feet and said: "Princess, my most sincere and respectful greetings!" Then he bowed and went out. As soon as he had disappeared, I said: "Well, you see? Who was right?"

But she was not in the least disconcerted. "Don't worry," she said; "we shall find a buyer all right, even at six million."

I wanted to tell her to go to the devil, but alas, I was properly in love. Perhaps it was just because I was in love that I did not notice the strangeness of the buyer whom I found for her, at five and a half millions, a few days later. The figure, high as it was, failed to make him gasp. He was a country gentleman, a big, tall young man who looked like a bear, by name Pandolfi. I took a dislike to him at once, as though I felt a presentiment about him. When I took him to see the Princess, I realized at once why it was that he had made no protest at the price. To begin with, they had, it seemed, a whole lot of friends

in common. And further, he looked at her in a kind of way that left no possible doubts. We made our usual examination of the three rooms and the bathroom, and then she opened the french window and went out with him on to the balcony to show him the view. I stayed inside the room and so was able to observe them. They were both resting their hands on the railing; and then I saw his hand approach hers as though by chance and place itself on top of it, covering it completely. I started counting, slowly, and reached twenty. Twenty seconds of stroking —it doesn't sound much, but you just try counting them! At twenty, with perfect naturalness, she disengaged her hand and came back into the room. He—to put it briefly —said that the apartment suited him, and went away. We were left alone and she, quite shamelessly, said: "You see, Proietti? Five and a half million . . . but we'll raise it yet."

Next morning I went back and found her awaiting me, as usual, at her desk in the drawing-room. She said to me briskly: "D'you know what I discovered yesterday, Proietti, while I was looking at the view with that client of yours?"

"That he's in love with you," I should have liked to reply; but I restrained myself. "I discovered," she went on, "that in one corner you can see quite a good piece of the Borghese Gardens. Proietti, we must strike while the iron is hot. . . . Today we'll ask Signor Pandolfi six and a half millions."

You see? She knew Pandolfi was in love with her, and was ready to speculate on it. She was now making him pay a round million for those twenty seconds that he had held her hand—fifty thousand lire a second. What an appetite! But this time I realized that she would get her price, and suddenly I was filled with rage and jealousy and disgust all at the same time. Hitherto I had been the go-between in a matter of business; but now she was forcing me to become the go-between in a love intrigue. Before I was fully aware of what I was saying, I burst out violently: "Princess, I'm a house-agent, not a pimp," and, red in the face, ran out of the room. I heard her say, in a tone that was not in the least offended: "But, Proietti, what's the matter with you?" And that was the last time I ever heard that sweet voice.

Some months afterwards I ran into Antonio, the butler, and asked him: "And how's the Princess?"

"She's getting married."

"Who to? I bet she's marrying that man Pandolfi who bought the apartment in the attic."

"Pandolfi indeed! . . . She's marrying a prince from South Italy, an old stick who might be her grandfather. . . but he's rich; she says he owns half Calabria. . . . Like attracts like, in fact."

"Is she still beautiful?"

"An angel."

THE BABY

WHEN the good lady from the Infant Welfare Society came to visit us and, like everyone else, asked us why we brought so many children into the world, my wife, who was in the dumps that day, told her the plain truth. "If we could afford it," she said, "we should go to the pictures in the evening. . . . As it is, since we haven't got the money, we go to bed, and so the children get born." The lady, on hearing this remark, looked uncomfortable and went away without saying a word. And I scolded my wife because it isn't always a good plan to tell the truth; and, before telling it, you have to know who you're dealing with.

When I was young and not yet married, I often used to amuse myself by reading the local news items in the newspaper, where they describe all the possible misfortunes that can happen to people, such as burglaries, murders, suicides and street accidents. And, amongst all these misfortunes, the only one that it seemed to me quite impossible could happen to me was to become what the paper called "a pitiful case", a person so extremely unfortunate as to be worthy of pity without recourse to any particular misfortune—owing, that is, to the mere fact of existing. As I said, I was young then, and did not yet know what it means to support a large family. But now,

to my surprise, I see that I have been gradually transformed into exactly what they mean by "a pitiful case". I used to read, for instance: "they live in the direst poverty". Well, today *I* live in the direst poverty. Or: "they live in a house which is a house only in name". Well, I live at Tormarancio, with my wife and six children, in a room that has nothing in it but a lot of mattresses spread on the floor, and, when it rains, the water pours down on us just as it does on the seats in the Via Ripetta. Or again: "the wretched woman, having discovered that she was pregnant, made a criminal decision—to rid herself of the fruit of her passion". Well, *we* made this decision too, my wife and I, by common agreement, when we discovered that she was pregnant for the seventh time. We decided, in fact, that, as soon as the weather grew warmer, we would leave the baby in a church, entrusting it to the charity of whosoever might be the first to find it.

Through the good offices of those same kind ladies, my wife went into hospital to have her baby, and then, as soon as she felt better, came back with the child to Tormarancio. As she came into the room, she said: "D'you know, even though a hospital's a hospital, I would willingly have stayed there instead of coming back here?" At these words the baby—just as if he had understood them—let out such a howl that you wouldn't have believed it. He was a fine, robust boy and had a powerful voice: so that at night, when he woke up and started to cry, he prevented everyone else from sleeping.

When May came, and the air was warm enough to be out of doors without an overcoat, we set out from Tormarancio to go into Rome. My wife held the baby close to her breast, and he was wrapped up in such a quantity of rags that she could safely have left him in a snowfield; and when we got into the town—perhaps in order to conceal the fact that she didn't like what we had come to do—she started to talk without stopping, and seemed exhausted and out of breath, with her hair all over the place and her eyes starting out of her head. At one moment she was talking about the various churches in which we might leave him, explaining to me that it must be a church into which rich people went, because, if the baby was going to be picked up by someone who was

poor like us, we might just as well keep him ourselves; next minute she was telling me that she insisted on the church being dedicated to the Madonna, because the Madonna had had a son too and would be able to understand certain things and so would grant her what she desired. I found this way of talking very wearisome and it put me in a state of agitation—all the more so because I was feeling humiliated too and did not like what I was doing; but I kept on telling myself that I must keep my head and appear calm and put heart into her. I made a few objections, chiefly in order to interrupt her flow of words, and then I said: "I've got an idea . . . why shouldn't we leave him in St. Peter's?" For a moment she hesitated, and then answered: "No, it's such a great big place . . . they mightn't even see him. . . . I'd rather try that little church in the Via Condotti where all those lovely shops are. . . . Lots of rich people drop in there—that's the place."

We took the bus and amongst the other people she sat silent. Every now and then she would rearrange the blanket more closely round the baby, or would cautiously uncover his face and look at him. The baby was asleep, his pink and white face deep in its wrappings. Like us, he was badly dressed; the only nice thing he had about him was his little blue woollen gloves, and indeed he held out his hands, wide open, as if to show them. We got out at the Largo Goldoni and at once my wife started chattering again. She stopped in front of a goldsmith's shop-window and, pointing to the jewels displayed on shelves covered with red velvet, said to me: "Look how beautiful they are. . . . The people in this street come here simply to buy jewellery and other lovely things. . . . Poor people don't come here. . . . And then, between one shop and another, they go into the church to pray for a moment . . . and then, while they're still in a good frame of mind, they'd see the baby and take him. . . ." All this she said as she stood looking at the jewellery, clutching the baby to her breast, with wide open eyes, and speaking as if to herself; and I did not dare contradict her. We went into the church. It was small, painted all over to look like yellow marble, with a number of little chapels and a high altar; and my wife said that she remembered it differently and that now, seeing it again, she did not like it at all.

However, she dipped her fingers in the holy water and crossed herself. Then, with the baby in her arms, she started walking slowly all around the church, examining it with a discontented, distrustful air. A cold, clear light came down through the lantern of the dome; my wife went from one side-chapel to another, looking at everything—the seats, the altars, the pictures—to see if it was a convenient place to leave the baby; while I followed at a distance, keeping an eye on the door all the time. There entered, all of a sudden, a tall young lady in red, with fair hair like gold. She knelt down, her close-fitting skirt stretching tight as she did so, prayed for barely one minute, crossed herself and went out again without looking at us. My wife, who had been observing her, suddenly said: "No, it's no good. . . . The people who come here are like that young lady, in a great hurry to go and amuse themselves and look at the shops. . . . Let's go." And with these words she walked out of the church.

We went some distance back along the Corso, hurrying all the time, my wife in front and I behind; and somewhere near the Piazza Venezia we went into another church. This one was much bigger than the first; it was almost dark, and was full of hangings and gilt ornamentations and glass cases crammed with silver hearts which gleamed in the dim light. There were quite a number of people there and at a casual glance I judged that they were all people in easy circumstances; the ladies were all wearing hats, the men well dressed. A priest was waving his arms in the pulpit, preaching a sermon; everyone was standing looking towards him; and this seemed to me a good thing because no one would notice us. I said to my wife, in a whisper: "Shall we try leaving him here?" and she nodded. We went into a side-chapel where it was very dark; there was nobody there and you could hardly see; my wife covered the baby's face with a corner of the blanket in which he was wrapped and then put him down on a chair, just as you might put down a cumbersome bundle so as to have your hands free. Then she knelt down and prayed for quite a long time, her face in her hands, whilst I, not knowing what to do, looked at all the hundreds of silver hearts of every size that covered the walls of the chapel. At last she rose to her feet, with a set face, crossed herself, and very slowly moved away from the chapel, fol-

lowed at a distance by me. The preacher, at that moment, shouted: "And Jesus said: Peter, whither goest thou?" This startled me, because it seemed to me that he was asking *me* the question. But, just as my wife was about to lift the curtain at the door, a voice behind us made us both jump: "Signora, you've left a package on the chair over there." It was a woman in black, one of those pious creatures who spend their days between church and sacristy. "Oh yes," said my wife, "thank you . . . I had forgotten it." And so we took up the bundle again and went out of the church feeling more dead than alive.

When we were outside, my wife said: "Nobody wants this poor little boy of mine"—rather like a person with something to sell, who has calculated on making a quick deal and then finds no one in the market to buy his goods. In the meantime she had started running again in that same breathless manner, so that her feet hardly seemed to touch the ground. We came out into the Piazza Santi Apostoli; the church was open; and, as we went in, my wife, seeing that it was big and spacious and shadowy, whispered to me: "This is what we want." In a determined fashion she walked over to one of the side-chapels, put down the baby on a bench and, without even crossing herself, or saying a prayer, or kissing the baby's forehead, hurried off towards the entrance door as though the floor were blazing beneath her feet. But she had only gone a few steps when the whole church reverberated with the sound of a despairing wail: it was feeding-time and the baby, punctual to the minute, was crying because he was hungry. Perhaps the sound of this violent crying made my wife lose her head: for she ran first towards the door, and then turned back, still running, and, without reflecting where she was, sat down on a bench, took the baby in her arms and undid her blouse to give him the breast. But, no sooner had she pulled out her breast and the baby, like a wolf, had seized upon it greedily, clutching with both hands, and had stopped crying, than a rude voice began shouting at her: "You can't do that in God's house. . . . Go on, get out . . . get out into the street." It was the sacristan, a little old man with a tuft of white beard under his chin and a voice bigger than himself. My wife, rising and covering her breast and the baby's head as best she could, said: "But the Madonna, you know, in the pictures,

always has her baby in her arms." "You want to compare yourself to the Madonna, do you?" he retorted. "You presumptuous woman." Well, anyhow, we left that church too, and went and sat in the gardens of the Piazza Venezia; and there my wife gave the baby the breast again until he was satisfied and went off to sleep once more.

It was evening now, and the churches were closing and we were tired and bewildered and without any ideas of what best to do. The thought of all I had been through in order to do something I ought not to be doing, made me feel desperate; and so I said to my wife: "Now listen, it's getting late and I can't go on like this; we've got to make up our minds." She answered, with some bitterness: "But he's your own blood. . . . D'you want to leave him just like that, in some odd corner, the way people leave a little parcel of tripe for the cats?" "No, not like that," I said, "but there are some things that have to be done at once and without thinking about them or you can't do them at all." "The truth of it is," she replied, "you're afraid I shall change my mind and take him home again. . . . You men, you're all cowards." I realized that at that moment I must not contradict her, so I answered, with moderation: "Don't worry, I know what you feel. . . . But you must remember that, whatever happens to him, it'll be better than growing up at Tormarancio, in a room without either a lavatory or a kitchen, with bugs in winter and flies in the summer." To this she made no reply.

Without knowing where we were going, we started off along the Via Nazionale, going up it towards the Torre di Nerone. Just below this, I noticed a small, narrow street, entirely deserted, sloping up from the street we were in, with a grey closed car standing in front of a doorway. I had an inspiration and went up to the car; I tried the handle and the door opened. I said to my wife: "Quick, this is our chance . . . put him on the back seat." She did as I told her and put the baby into the back of the car and I closed the door. All this we did in an instant, without anybody seeing us. Then I took her by the arm and we hurried off in the direction of the Piazza del Quirinale.

The square was empty and almost in darkness, with just a few lamps lit at the feet of the great buildings and all the lights of Rome sparkling in the darkness below, beyond the parapet. My wife went over to the fountain

underneath the obelisk, sat down on a seat and all at once started weeping, on her own account as it were, bending down and turning her back on me. "What is it now?" I said to her. And she said: "Now that I've left him, I miss him. . . . There seems to me to be something missing here, where he used to take hold of my breast." I said, at a venture: "Well yes, of course . . . but you'll get over it." She shrugged her shoulders and went on crying. Then, suddenly, her tears dried up, as rain dries on the road when the wind blows. She jumped up again, in a fury, and, pointing to one of the buildings looking on the square, said: "I'm going over there now and I'm going to ask to see the King and tell him all about it." "Stop," I cried, catching hold of her by the hand, "you're crazy. . . . And don't you know the King's no longer there?" "What does that matter to me?" she said; "I shall speak to whoever's taken his place . . . there'll be somebody there." She was, in fact, running towards the great door of the palace, and goodness knows what sort of a scene she might have made if I, in desperation, had not suddenly said to her: "Look here, I've been thinking it over . . . let's go back to that car and take the baby out again. . . . I mean, let's keep him ourselves; after all, one more or less. . . ." This idea, which was really the crux of the whole matter, at once superseded the idea of speaking to the King. "But will he still be there?" she said, quickly starting off towards the little street in which the grey car had been standing. "Of course," I answered, "it's not even five minutes. . . ."

The car was, in fact, still there. But just at the moment when my wife was about to open the door, a short middle aged man, with a look of authority about him, emerged from a doorway and shouted: "Stop, stop! . . . What are you doing with my car?" "I want what belongs to me," replied my wife without turning round, as she stooped down to pick up the bundle from the seat. But the man was insistent. "What have you got there?" he demanded. "This is *my* car . . . d'you understand? It's *mine*." You ought to have seen my wife. She drew herself up and went for him. "Who's taking anything from you?" she cried. "You needn't worry, no one's taking anything of yours. . . . And as for your car, I spit on it. . . . Look!"—and indeed she really did spit, on to the door. "But that parcel

. . . ?" began the other, bewildered. "It's not a parcel," she retorted; "it's my child. . . . Look if you like!"

She uncovered the baby's face and showed it to him, and then went on: "You and your wife couldn't ever have a child as fine as this one—not even if you were born all over again. . . . And don't try to lay your hands on me, or I'll shout for the police and tell them you were trying to steal my baby." In fact, she threatened and scolded so much that he, poor man, standing there red in the face and open-mouthed, almost had a fit. Finally, she walked away in a leisurely manner and joined me at the corner of the street.

THE PERFECT CRIME

THE thing was stronger than I was: every time I got to know a girl, I introduced her to Rigamonti, and he, as regularly, lured her away from me. Possibly I did it to show him that I had just as much success with women as he had; or possibly it was because I could never bring myself to think ill of him, and each time, in spite of his former treachery, I fell back again into the habit of looking upon him as a friend. I could have borne it more easily if he had done things with a little delicacy, a little good breeding; but he behaved with utter insolence, just as though the matter didn't concern me at all. He reached the point of courting the girl in my presence; of making dates with her under my very nose. In cases like this, as is well known, it is the person with the better manners who gives way: while he had no scruples about doing whatever was most convenient for himself, I would stand quietly aside for fear of provoking a quarrel and thus showing a lack of respect towards the young lady. Once or twice I protested, but in a timid sort of way, because I am not good at expressing my feelings, and when I am boiling with rage inside I remain outwardly cold, so that no one would even think I was angry. D'you know what he answered? "Blame yourself, not me. . . . If the girl pre-

ferred me, it means that I know how to manage things better than you do." This was true just as it was true that physically he was superior to me. But it is precisely because he leaves your girl friends alone that you can recognize a true friend.

To cut a long story short, after he had played this trick on me four or five times, I began to hate him so passionately that, at the bar where we both worked, I used to take care to stand sideways or with my back to him, so as not to see him, even when I was behind the counter with him and we were both serving the same customers. By this time I had almost given up thinking about the wrongs he had done me; I thought merely about *him,* and about what he was like, and I realized that I couldn't bear him any longer. I hated his sturdy, stupid face, with its low forehead, and small eyes, its big, hooked nose, its full lips and slight moustache. I hated his hair that was like a helmet on his head, black and shining, with two long locks that started at his temples and went right over to the back of his neck. I hated his hairy arms, which he showed off as he stood working the coffee-machine. His nose, above all, fascinated me. It was broad at the nostrils, curved, thick, pale in the middle of his ruddy face, so that it looked as if the force of the bone had stretched the skin. Often did I think of giving him a punch right on that nose of his and hearing the bone go crack under my fist. But this was a dream, for I am small and slim, and Rigamonti could have knocked me down with one finger.

I don't know how it was that I first came to think of killing him; this may have dated from the evening when we went together to see an American film called *A Perfect Crime.* To be exact, I did not at first want really to kill him, merely to imagine how I should behave in order to do so. It gave me pleasure to think about it at night before I went to sleep and in the morning before getting up, and—oh yes, indeed—in the daytime too, when there was nothing doing in the bar and Rigamonti was sitting on a stool behind the counter, reading the paper, his well-greased head bent over the page. I used to think: "Now I'll take the pestle that we use for breaking the ice and hit him over the head with it"; but of course I was only joking. In fact, it was like being in love and thinking all day about the woman and imagining the things that

you would like to do and say to her. Only, in my case, Rigamonti took the place of a sweetheart, and the pleasure that others take in fancying kisses and caresses, *I* found in dreaming about his death.

Still as a joke, and because I took so much pleasure in it, I worked out an imaginary plan in every detail. But then, having formulated this plan, I was assailed by the temptation to put it into practice; and this temptation was so strong that I stopped trying to resist it and made up my mind to take action. But perhaps it was that I did not make up my mind at all but found myself involved in action when I believed I was still indulging in fancies. Which is to say that, just as when one is in love, I did everything in a natural, effortless, involuntary fashion, almost without noticing it.

I began, therefore, telling him, between one cup of coffee and the next, that I had got to know a very lovely girl, and that this time it wasn't just one of the usual girls whom *I* liked and whom *he* pinched from me, but a girl who had had a good look at him and who wanted him and no one else. I repeated this to him day by day for a week, adding new details each time on the subject of this ardent love and pretending to show myself jealous. At first he tried to appear indifferent, and said: "If she loves me, she can come to the bar. . . . I'll stand her a cup of coffee"; but soon he began to lose his nerve. Every now and then, with a pretence that he was joking, he would ask: "Now tell me—this girl . . . does she love me still?" "Of course she does," I would reply. "And what does she say?" "She says she finds you very attractive." "But in what way? What does she find attractive about me?" "Everything—your nose, your hair, your eyes, your mouth, the way you work the coffee-machine . . . everything, I tell you. . . ." The very things, in fact, that I hated in him—and I would have killed him simply for them—these very things, I pretended, had turned the head of the girl that I had invented. He smiled and was filled with pride, for he was absurdly conceited and thought the world of himself. You could see that his silly brain was concerned with this and nothing else, and that he wanted to meet the girl and only pride prevented his asking me. At last one day, he said angrily: "Now look here. . . . Either you introduce me to her, or else you'd better stop

talking about her." I was waiting for these words; and immediately fixed an appointment with him for the next evening.

My plan was a simple one. We closed at ten o'clock, but the proprietor always remained in the bar, doing the accounts, until half past ten. I would take Rigamonti to a spot below the embankment of the Viterbo railway close by, telling him that the girl would be waiting for us there. At a quarter past ten the train went past, and I, taking advantage of the noise, would shoot Rigamonti with a "Beretta" which I had bought some time before in the Piazza Vittorio. At twenty minutes past ten I should return to the bar to fetch a parcel I had forgotten, and so the proprietor would see me. At half past ten, at latest, I should be in bed in the porter's room at the block of flats where the porter rented me a camp-bed for the night. This plan I had copied, in part, from the film, particularly as regards the synchronization of the crime with the passing of the train. It was quite possible that it might not be successful, in the sense that I might be discovered. But I should still have the satisfaction of having given vent to my hatred. And for this satisfaction I felt prepared even to do hard labour.

Next day we were kept very busy because it was Saturday, and this was a good thing, for it meant that he did not speak to me about the girl and I had no time to think of the matter. At ten o'clock, as usual, we took off our linen jackets and, having said good-night to the proprietor, went out under the half-lowered roller-blind. The bar was in the avenue that leads to the Acqua Acetosa, a mere step from the Viterbo railway. At that hour the last couples had left the Garden of Remembrance on the hillock near by, and there was no one in the dark avenue under the trees. It was April; the air was already soft and the sky was gradually clearing, though the moon was not yet visible.

We walked along the avenue, Rigamonti, in the highest spirits, patting me protectively on the back in his usual way, and I myself rigid, my hand on my chest, pressing against the pistol in the inside pocket of my wind-jacket. We left the avenue at the fork and turned into a grassy path running along under the railway embankment. There, owing to the embankment, it was darker than

elsewhere, and I had taken this into calculation too. Rigamonti walked in front and I behind. When we reached the appointed place, not far from a lamp standard, I said: "She said to wait for her here . . . you'll see, she'll come in a moment." He stopped, lit a cigarette, and answered: "As a barman you're pretty good . . . but as a pimp you're incomparable." He was, in fact, just as offensive to me as he always was.

It was assuredly a lonely spot, and the moon, as it rose behind us lit up the whole of the flat ground beneath us, thinly veiled in white mist with dark patches of scrub and mounds of silt here and there, and with the Tiber winding through it, loop after loop, looking like silver. I seemed to feel myself shivering because of the damp mist and I said to Rigamonti, more for my own benefit than his: "Of course she can't be punctual to the minute. . . . She's in service and she has to wait till her employers go out." He answered promptly: "No, no, there she is." I turned and saw the black figure of a woman coming along the path towards us.

I was told afterwards that the place was frequented by women of that type for meeting their clients; but I did not know this, and I instantly thought, almost, that the girl had not been invented by me but really existed. Meanwhile Rigamonti was walking towards her, full of assurance, and automatically I followed him. When she was a few paces off, she came out of the darkness into the light of the lamp, and then I saw her. And almost she frightened me. She must have been at least sixty, and she had strange, mad-looking eyes painted with great black circles, a heavily powdered face and a crimson mouth, hair fluttering in the breeze, and a black ribbon round her neck. She was of the type that seeks the darkest places so as not to be seen; and it is certainly hard to understand how such women, old and decrepit as they are, still contrive to find clients. Rigamonti, however, before actually seeing her, had already asked her, in his usual shameless way: "Signorina, were you expecting us?"—and she, equally shamelessly, had replied: "Yes, of course." Then, finally, he saw her clearly and understood his mistake. He moved a step back and said, hesitatingly: "Er, well, I'm sorry, I'm afraid this evening I can't . . . but here is my

friend"; then took a sideways leap and disappeared down the embankment. I realized that Rigamonti had thought I intended to avenge myself by presenting him with a monster of this kind, after all those pretty girls; and I also realized that my perfect crime was evaporating. I stood looking at the woman, who said to me, poor creature, with a smile like the grimace on a carnival mask: "Well, my pretty blondie, will you give me a cigarette?" and I felt sorry for her, and for myself too, and even—yes, even for Rigamonti. I had felt such intense hatred, and now, somehow or other, my hatred had been swept away; and the tears came into my eyes and I reflected that, thanks to this woman, I had been saved from becoming a murderer. "I haven't a cigarette," I said to her, "but here, take this . . . if you sell it you can always get a thousand lire or so"; and I put the "Beretta" into her hand. Then I, too, jumped down off the slope of the embankment and ran off towards the avenue. At that moment the Viterbo train went past, carriage after carriage with all the windows lit up, scattering red sparks into the night. I stopped and looked at it as it went off into the distance; and then I listened to the sound of it until it ceased; and finally I went home.

Next day, at the bar, Rigamonti said to me: "Of course I knew there was a catch in it somewhere. . . . But never mind—it was a good joke." I looked at him and then became aware that I no longer hated him, although he was still the same as before, with the same forehead, the same eyes, the same nose, the same hair; the same hairy arms that he still showed off in the same way as he worked the coffee-machine. All of a sudden I felt lighter, as though the April wind, which puffed out the curtain at the door of the bar, had blown right inside me. Rigamonti handed me two cups of coffee to take to two customers who had sat down in the sun at a table outside, and I, as I took them, said to him in a low voice: "Shall we meet this evening? I've invited Amelia to come along. . . ." He knocked out the used coffee-grounds under the counter, refilled the measures with fresh coffee, released some steam from the machine and then answered simply, without any bitterness: "I'm sorry, but this evening I can't." I went out with the cups; and I realized I was disappointed

that he was not coming that evening and was not going to steal Amelia from me, as he had stolen all the other girls.

THE STRAWBERRY MARK

AS far as my brother-in-law Raimondo was concerned, things were bound to finish like that: I am sorry for my sister, but it wasn't my fault. The first hot day, then, in the morning, I made my bathing costume and towel into a bundle, tied it on to the saddle of my bicycle, and started off with the bicycle across my shoulders towards the stairs, with the idea of creeping off unobserved and going to Ostia. But—talk about bad luck!—who should I meet on the landing but Raimondo, Raimondo himself, of all the many people who sleep in our house? He immediately eyed my bundle and asked: "Where are you going?" "To Ostia." "And what about the work?" "What work?" "Don't be a fool. . . . You can go to Ostia on Monday. . . . We're going to the shop now." To put it briefly, Raimondo is a big, tall young man and I am small and thin. He took the bicycle forcibly away from me, shut it up in a cupboard in the wall and then, taking me by the arm, pushed me downstairs, saying: "Come along, it's late." "Never late enough," I answered, "for what *we* have to do." He said no more, but I could see from his face that I had touched a tender spot. With my poor sister's money he had opened a barber's shop; but business was not going very well—in fact, to tell the truth, it was going extremely badly. There were the two of us in the shop, himself and me; but, for all the clients who turned up, we might as well have gone out for a walk, both of us, leaving the boy, Paolino, to look after the shop—just to prevent people stealing the razors and brushes into the bargain.

We walked off in silence, beneath a sun which was already scorching. The shop was only a short distance from the house, in the heart of the old part of Rome, in the Via del Seminario; and this had been the first mis-

take, because it was a street through which nobody passed, in a quarter where there was nothing but offices and poor people. When we arrived, Raimondo pulled up the roller-blind, took off his jacket and put on his apron; and I did the same. Paolino also arrived, and Raimondo at once put the broom into his hands and told him to sweep the place carefully, because, as he said, cleanliness is the first essential for a barber's shop. Yes indeed, you may well sweep the floor: but that won't help you to turn tin into gold! For not only was the street an unhappy choice, but the shop itself was a wretched-looking place—small, with a dado round the walls painted to look like marble, with cheap wooden chairs and shelves painted pale blue, stained, chipped china that had been taken over from another establishment, and cloths and towels hemmed and embroidered by my sister so that you could tell from a mile off that they were home-made. Well, Paolino swept the floor—a very accommodating kind of floor, being made of greyish tiles—while Raimondo lay back in a chair and smoked his first cigarette. When the sweeping was done, Raimondo, with a lordly gesture, gave Paolino twenty-five lire to go and buy a newspaper; and when the boy came back with it, he plunged into a close study of the sporting news. And so the morning began—with Raimondo lying back in the chair, reading and smoking; Paolino squatting in the doorway, amusing himself by pulling the cat's tail; and I, sitting outside the shop, stupefying myself with watching the street. As I have already said, it was an unfrequented street: in an hour I must have seen, all in all, about ten people go past, almost all women coming back from the market with their shopping-bags. Finally the sun, having gone round behind the roofs, came into the street; then I retired into the shop and sat down in another of the chairs.

Another half-hour went by, and still no customers. All of a sudden, Raimondo threw down the paper, stretched himself, yawned and said: "Come on, Serafino . . . as the customers don't come, you might as well keep your hand in: give me a shave." It was not the first time he had asked me to act as his barber, but that day, with the thought of his having prevented me from going to Ostia still running in my head, it annoyed me more than usual. Without saying anything, I seized a towel and stuffed it

under his chin, in a very rude sort of way. Anyone else would have understood, but not he. Conceitedly, he was now leaning forward to look at himself in the glass, examining his chin, feeling his cheeks with his fingers.

Paolino zealously handed me the wooden soap-bowl; I worked up a lather and then, whisking the brush round and round as though I were beating eggs, soaped Raimondo's face right up to the eyes. I worked away furiously with the brush, and in a very short time made two enormous balloons of foam on his cheeks. Then I grasped the razor and started shaving him with big, vigorous strokes, from the bottom upwards, as though I wanted to cut his throat. At this he was frightened, and said: "Gently now . . . what's come over you?" I made no answer, but, thrusting back his head, removed the lather, with a single sweep of the razor, from the base of his throat to the dimple in his chin. He didn't breathe a word, but I knew he was fuming. I also shaved him against the lie of the hair, using the same method; and then he bent forward over the basin and rinsed his face. As I dried him I gave him a few good slaps in the face which, if I had had my way, would have been real blows, and then, at his request, I sprayed him thoroughly with talc powder. I thought I had finished with him; but he, lying back in the chair again, said: "And now a haircut."

I protested: "But I cut your hair only the other day." He replied, calmly: "Yes, you did, it's true . . . but now you must trim the edges; the hair's beginning to grow again." Once more I had to swallow my annoyance, and, after shaking out the towel, I fastened it under his chin again. Raimondo, it must be admitted, has magnificent hair, thick, black and glossy, growing down low on his forehead and brushed back thence in long locks right down to the back of his neck; but that day I felt a strong dislike for this splendid hair, which seemed to have in it all the laziness and conceit of his caddish nature. "Now, be careful," he warned me; "just a trim, don't shorten it"; and I answered between my teeth: "You needn't worry." As I snipped off the tiny, almost invisible ends of his hair I thought about Ostia, and a great longing came over me to cut a big slice out of the glossy mass with my scissors: but I did not do it, for my sister's sake. As for him, he had now taken up the paper again, and was enjoying the

twittering sound of my scissors just as if it had been the song of a canary. At one moment, casting a glance at the mirror, he said to me: "D'you know, you've got the makings of a very good barber?" "And you"—I should have liked to reply—"you've got the makings of a man who manages very well on the immoral earnings of women." Well, so I trimmed the edges of his hair; then I took the hand-mirror and held it at the back of his neck to show what I had done, and asked in an insinuating tone: "And now, shall it be a shampoo? . . . or a nice friction?" I was joking, but he, with an impassive face, replied: "Friction." This time I couldn't help exclaiming: "But, Raimondo, we've only got six bottles altogether, and you want to waste one on a friction for yourself!" He shrugged his shoulders. "Mind your own business. . . . It's not your money, is it?" I wanted to answer him: "It's more mine than yours, anyhow"; but I said nothing, again for the sake of my sister who was dying of love for this man; and I obeyed. Raimondo insisted, shamelessly, on choosing which perfume he would have. Violet was the one he preferred; and he then instructed me to rub his scalp thoroughly and massage his head with the tips of my fingers, beginning at the bottom and working upwards. While I was giving him the massage I kept looking at the door to see if a customer would come in and interrupt this buffoonery; but, as usual, no one appeared. After the friction, he made me put some solid brilliantine on his hair—the very best kind, out of the little French pot. Finally he took the comb from me and himself combed his hair, with a care which I will not attempt to describe. "Now I feel fine," he said, getting up from the chair. I looked at the clock: it was almost one. I said to him: "Raimondo. . . . I've given you a shave and a haircut, I've given you a friction. . . . Now let me go to the sea . . . there's still time." But all he said, as he took off his apron, was: "I'm going home for lunch now . . . if you go too, who's to mind the shop? . . . I tell you, you can go to Ostia on Monday." He put on his jacket, gave me a nod and went off, followed by Paolino who was to bring me my lunch from home.

Left alone, I felt like kicking the chairs, breaking the mirrors, and throwing the brushes and razors into the street. But, with the thought still in mind that, really and

truly, all this stuff belonged to my sister and therefore to me too, I overcame my anger and lay back in a chair, waiting. There was no one at all passing along the street now; the paving-stones were blinding in the sunshine; inside the shop all I could see was myself, with my scowling face reflected in all the mirrors in turn; and partly from hunger, partly from the effect of these mirrors, my head was going round and round. Luckily Paolino arrived with a plate done up in a napkin; I told him to go home too and retired into the room at the back of the shop, a little cubby-hole hidden behind a semi-transparent curtain, so as to eat my food in peace. At that same moment, at home, Raimondo would be turning up his nose at the good things my sister had been preparing for him; but I, when I undid the napkin, found nothing but a plate of half-cold spaghetti, a roll of bread and a small bottle of wine. I ate slowly, if only to pass the time; and all the time, while I was eating, I was thinking that Raimondo was in clover and that it was a bitter shame that my sister had taken up with him. I had only just finished eating when the sound of a voice made me jump—"May I come in?"

I came hurriedly out of my cubby-hole. It was Santina, daughter of the porter in the building opposite. She was dark and small but with a good figure, and a pretty little face that was rather broad in its lower part, and two very knowing black eyes. She often dropped into the shop, with one excuse or another; and I, in my ingenuous way, imagined it was for me that she came. Her visit, at this moment, gave me pleasure; I told her to make herself at home and she sat down in one of the barber's chairs: she was so small that her feet didn't reach the floor. We started talking, and I, to get the conversation going, remarked that it would be a lovely day to go to the seaside. She sighed and answered that she would be delighted to go, but, alas, that afternoon, she had to hang out the washing on the roof. "Would you like me to come and help you?" I suggested. "Come up on the roof with me?" she said. "Why, I'd be crazy if I let you. . . . My Mum would soon be after me, if I did." She looked round, trying to find something to say, and at last remarked: "You haven't many customers, have you?" "Many?" I said: "none at all." "You ought to open a hairdresser's shop

for ladies," she said; "then I and my friends would come to you for a perm." In order to ingratiate myself with her, I suggested: "I can't give you a perm—but, if you like, I *have* got a scent-spray." She replied at once, coquettishly: "Really? And what scent is it?" "A very good scent," I said. I took the bottle with the atomizer and began spraying her here and there, all over, for a joke, while she cried out that I was making her eyes smart, and put up her hands to protect herself. At that moment Raimondo arrived.

"That's fine; you're having a great time," he said severely, without looking at us. Santina had risen to her feet, apologizing; I replaced the bottle on the shelf. Raimondo said: "You know I don't want women in the shop. . . . And the spray is for the use of customers." Santina protested, in an affected sort of way: "Signor Raimondo, I wasn't doing any harm"; and off she went, without hurrying herself. I noticed that Raimondo cast a lingering glance after her, and this annoyed me because I saw that Santina had attracted him; and, from the way in which she had protested, the idea came into my head, all of a sudden, that he had attracted her too. I said sulkily: "The violet friction for you—that's all right, of course . . . but a little whiff of scent for that girl, who at least was kind enough to keep me company—oh no, that's not allowed. . . . Where's the sense in it?" Raimondo said nothing, but went to take off his jacket in the back shop. And so the afternoon began.

A couple of hours passed, in heat and silence. At first Raimondo slept for nearly an hour, his head thrown back, purple in the face, his mouth open, snoring like a pig; then he woke up and, taking a pair of scissors, amused himself for a good half-hour by snipping off the hairs in his nostrils and ears; finally, not knowing what to do, he offered to give me a shave. Now, if there was one thing I disliked more than shaving him, it was being shaved by him. As long as it was I, the assistant, who was shaving *him*, it seemed to me in order; but that he, the boss, should shave *me*—that could only mean that we were a couple of failures without so much as a dog to make use of our services. However, since I too was bored at having nothing to do, I accepted his offer. He had already cleared the lather from one side of my face and was pre-

paring to start on the other, when suddenly, from the street, came Santina's voice again: "May I come in?"

We both turned round, I with my face half-covered in soap, Raimondo with the razor poised in the air: and there she was smiling, provoking, with one foot on the doorstep and the basket full of wrung-out washing resting on her thigh, looking at us. "Excuse me," she said, "but as I knew you hadn't any customers at this time of day, I was wondering whether possibly Signor Raimondo, who is so strong, would help me to carry this basket of washing up on to the roof? . . . Please excuse me." If you could have seen Raimondo . . . ! He put down the razor, said to me: "Serafino, you must finish shaving yourself," threw off his apron, and off he went, like a rocket, together with Santina. Before I could recover myself, they had already vanished into the entrance of the building opposite, laughing and joking.

Then, without hurrying, for I knew I had time, I finished shaving, I washed and dried my face, and then I told Paolino: "Go to the house and tell my sister Giuseppina to come here at once. . . . Go on, run."

Giuseppina arrived shortly afterwards, half fainting with fright. Seeing her so crooked and ugly, poor creature, with that strawberry mark on her cheek in which lay the whole story of the shop that had been started with her money, I almost took pity on her and thought of not telling her anything. But it was too late now, and besides, I wanted to get my revenge on Raimondo. So I said to her: "Don't be frightened, there's nothing wrong. . . . It's just that Raimondo has gone up on to the roof to help the porter's daughter, over the way, to hang out her washing." "God help me!" she said, "now there's going to be trouble"; and she went straight to the big entrance-door across the street. I took off my apron, slipped on my jacket, and pulled down the roller-blind. But, before I went away, I hung up a printed notice which we had taken over, with the wash-basins, from the other establishment, and which said: "Closed on account of family bereavement."

JEWELLERY

YOU can be quite sure that, when a woman finds her way into a group of men friends, that group, without the slightest doubt, is bound to disintegrate and each member of it to go off on his own account. That year we formed a group of young men who were all in the closest sympathy with each other, always united, always in agreement, always together. We were all of us earning a very good living, Tore with his garage, the two Modesti brothers with their meat-broker's business, Pippo Morganti with his pork-butcher's shop, Rinaldo with his bar, and I with a varied assortment of things: at that moment I was dealing in resin and products allied to it. Although we were all under thirty, none of us weighed less than twelve or thirteen stone: we all knew how to wield a knife and fork. During the day we were at work; but from seven o'clock onwards we were always together, first at Rinaldo's bar in the Corso Vittorio, and then in a restaurant with a garden in the neighbourhood of the Chiesa Nuova. We spent Sundays together, of course: either at the stadium watching football matches, or on expeditions to the Castelli Romani, or, in the warm weather, at Ostia or Ladispoli. There were six of us, yet it might be said that we were one single person. So, supposing that one of us was smitten by a caprice, the other five were soon smitten too. With regard to jewellery, it was Tore who started it: he came one evening to the restaurant wearing a wristwatch of massive gold, with a plaited gold strap nearly an inch wide. We asked him who had given it to him. "The Director of the Bank of Italy," he said, by which he meant that he had bought it with his own money. Then he slipped it off and showed it to us: it was a watch of a well-known make, double-cased and with a second hand, and, together with its stiff plaited strap, it weighed goodness knows how much. It made a great impression upon us. "An investment," said somebody. But Tore replied: "What d'you mean, an invest-

ment? I like wearing it on my wrist, that's all." When we met next day at the usual restaurant, Morganti already had a wristwatch of his own, with a gold strap too, but not such a heavy one. Then it was the turn of the Modesti brothers who each bought one—larger ones than Tore's and with plaited straps that were less solid but broader. As for Rinaldo and me, as we both liked Tore's watch, we asked him where he had got it and then went together to a good shop in the Corso and each bought one.

It was now May, and often in the evenings we used to go to Monte Mario, to the inn there, to drink wine and eat fresh beans and sheep's milk cheese. One evening Tore put out his hand to help himself to beans and we all saw a ring on his finger, a massive ring containing a diamond of no very great size but a fine one nevertheless. "My goodness!" we exclaimed. "Now look here," he said roughly, "you're not to imitate me, you pack of monkeys. . . . I bought this so as to be different." However, he took it off and we passed it round: it was really a very fine diamond, limpid, perfect. But Tore is a big, rather soft-looking chap, with a flat, flabby face, two little pig-like eyes, a nose that looks as if it were made of butter and a mouth like a purse with broken hinges. With that ring on his small, fat finger and that watch on his stumpy wrist, he looked almost like a woman. The diamond ring, as he wished, was not copied. However, we each of us bought a nice ring for ourselves. The Modesti brothers had two similar rings made both of red gold but with different stones in them, one green and one blue; Rinaldo bought himself a ring of a more or less antique style, pierced and carved, with a brown cameo containing a little white figure of a nude woman; Morganti, always anxious to cut a dash, acquired one actually made of platinum, with a black stone; while I myself, being more conventional, contented myself with a ring which had a square setting and a flat yellow stone upon which I had my initials cut, so that I could use it for sealing parcels. After the rings came cigarette-cases. It was Tore, as usual, who began it, by producing a long, flat case—made of gold, of course—with crossed lines incised on it, and snapping it open under our noses; and then everyone imitated him, some in one way and some in another. After the cigarette-cases, we all indulged our own whims: somebody bought

a bracelet with a medal, to wear on his other wrist; somebody else a pressure-controlled fountain pen; somebody else a little chain with a cross and a medallion of the Madonna to hang round his neck; and somebody else a cigarette-lighter. Tore, vainest of all, acquired three more rings; and now he looked more like a woman than ever, especially when he took off his jacket and appeared in a short-sleeved shirt, displaying his big, soft arms and hands covered with rings.

We were all laden with jewellery now; and I don't know why, but it was just at that moment that things began to go wrong. It didn't amount to much—a little teasing, a few rather caustic remarks, a few sharp retorts. And then one evening Rinaldo, who owned the bar, arrived at our usual restaurant with a girl, his new cashier. Her name was Lucrezia and she was perhaps not yet even twenty, but she was as fully developed as a woman of thirty. Her skin was white as milk, her eyes black, large, steady and expressionless, her mouth red, her hair black. She looked indeed like a statue, especially as she always remained still and composed and hardly spoke at all. Rinaldo confided to us that he had found her by means of a commercial advertisement, and he said he knew nothing about her, not even whether she had a family or whom she lived with. She was just the right person, he added, for the cash-desk: a girl like that attracted clients by her good looks and then, by her serious demeanour, kept them at a distance; a plain girl fails to attract, and a pretty but forthcoming one does no work and creates disorder. The presence of Lucrezia that evening caused considerable constraint among us: we sat very upright the whole time, with our jackets on, talking in a reserved manner without any jokes or coarse words and eating very politely; even Tore tried to eat his fruit with a knife and fork, without much success however. Next day we all rushed to the bar to see her at her duties. She was sitting on a tiny stool, her hips—which were already too broad for her age—bulging over its sides: and her haughty bosom was almost pressing against the keys of the cash-register. We all stood there open-mouthed as we watched her calmly, precisely, unhurriedly distributing price-dockets, continually pressing down the keys of the machine without even looking at them, her eyes fixed straight ahead of her in

the direction of the bar counter. She notified the barman, each time, in a quiet, impersonal voice: "Two coffees. . . . One bitter. . . . One orangeade. . . . One beer." She never smiled, she never looked at the customer; and certainly there were some who went up very close to her in the hope of being looked at. She was dressed with propriety, but like the poor girl that she was: in a simple, sleeveless white dress. But clean, fresh, well ironed. *She* wore no jewellery, not even ear-rings, although the lobes of her ears had been pierced. We, of course, when we saw how pretty she was, started making jokes, encouraged by Rinaldo, who was proud of her. But she, after the first few jokes, said: "We shall meet at the restaurant this evening, shan't we? So leave me in peace now. . . . I don't like being disturbed while I'm working." Tore, to whom these words were addressed because he was the most prying and ill-mannered, said with feigned surprise: "I say, I'm sorry . . . we're only poor people, and we didn't know we had to do with a princess. . . . I'm sorry . . . we didn't mean any offence." She replied, drily: "I'm not a princess but a poor girl who works for her living . . . and I'm not offended. . . . One coffee and one bitter." And so we went away feeling rather humiliated.

In the evening we all met, as usual, at the restaurant. Rinaldo and Lucrezia were the last to arrive; and we immediately ordered our dinner. For a short time, while we were waiting for our food, there was again a feeling of constraint; then the proprietor brought in a big dish of chicken *alla romana*, already cut up, with tomato sauce and red peppers. We all looked at each other, and Tore, interpreting our common feeling, exclaimed: "You know what I say? When I eat I like to feel free . . . do as I do and you'll feel better." As he spoke he seized hold of a leg of chicken and, lifting it to his mouth with his two ring-covered hands, started to devour it. This was the signal; after a moment of hesitation we all began eating with our hands—all except Rinaldo and, of course, Lucrezia who nibbled delicately at a little piece of breast. After the first moment we recovered ourselves and went back, in every possible respect, to our old noisy ways. We talked as we ate and ate as we talked; we gulped down brimming glasses of wine with our mouths full; we slouched back in our chairs; we told our usual racy stories. In fact,

perhaps out of defiance, we behaved worse than usual; and I don't remember ever having eaten so much, and with so much enjoyment, as I did that evening. When we had finished dinner, Tore loosened the buckle of his trouser-band and uttered a profound belch, which would have shaken the ceiling if it hadn't happened that we were out of doors, under a pergola. "Ugh, I feel better," he declared. He took a toothpick and, as he always did, started prodding at his teeth, all of them, one by one, and then all over again; and finally, with the toothpick stuck into the corner of his mouth, he told us a really indecent story. At this, Lucrezia rose to her feet and said: "Rinaldo, I feel tired. . . . If you don't mind, will you take me home now?" We all exchanged meaning glances: she had been Rinaldo's cashier for barely two days and already she was talking to him familiarly and calling him by his Christian name. A commercial advertisement in the paper, indeed! They went out and, the moment they had gone, Tore gave another belch and said: "About time too . . . I'd had enough. . . . Did you see the haughtiness of it? And him following behind as good as gold . . . as meek as a lamb! As for that commercial advertisement—matrimonial advertisement, I should say!"

For two or three days the same scenes were repeated: Lucrezia eating composedly and silently; the rest of us trying to pretend she wasn't there; Rinaldo divided between Lucrezia and us and not knowing what line to take. But there was something brewing, we all felt that. The girl —still waters run deep—gave no sign, but all the time she was wanting Rinaldo to choose between herself and us. At last, one evening, for no precise reason—perhaps because it was hot and, as one knows, heat gets on people's nerves—Rinaldo, half-way through dinner, made an attack upon us, in this way: "This is the last time I'm coming to eat with you." We were all astonished, and Tore asked: "Oh, is that really so? And may we ask why?" "Because I don't like you." "You don't like us? Well, I'm sure we're all very sorry for that—really terribly sorry." "You're a bunch of swine, that's what you are." "Now be careful what you say, but . . . are you crazy?" "Yes, you're a bunch of swine; I say it and I repeat it. . . . Eating with you makes me feel sick." By this time we were all red in the face with anger, and some of us had jumped up from

the table. "It's you," said Tore, "who's the biggest swine of all. Who gave you the right to judge us? Haven't we always been all together? Haven't we always done the same things?" "You be quiet," Rinaldo said to him; "with all that jewellery on you, you look like one of those women—you know who I mean. . . . All you need is some scent. . . . I say, haven't you ever thought of putting on some scent?" This blow was aimed at all of us; and, realizing the source from which it came, we all looked at Lucrezia: but she, hypocritically, kept on pulling Rinaldo by the sleeve and urging him to stop and come away. Then Tore said: "You've got jewellery too . . . you've got a watch and a ring and a bracelet . . . just as much as anyone else." Rinaldo was beside himself now. "But you know what I'm going to do?" he cried. "I'm taking them all off and giving them to her. . . . Come on, take them, Lucrezia, I'm giving them to you." As he spoke, he slipped off his ring, his bracelet, his wristwatch, pulled his cigarette-case out of his pocket and threw the whole lot into the girl's lap. "None of the rest of you," he said insultingly, "would ever do that . . . you *couldn't* do it." "Go to hell," said Tore; but you could see, now, that he was ashamed of having all those rings on his fingers. "Rinaldo," said Lucrezia calmly, "take your things and let's go." She gathered all the things Rinaldo had given her into a heap and put them into his pocket. Rinaldo, however, owing to some kind of grudge that he had against us, continued to abuse us even while allowing Lucrezia to drag him away. "You're a bunch of swine, I tell you. . . . Why don't you learn how to eat; why don't you learn how to live. . . . Swine!" "Idiot!" shouted Tore, mad with rage. "Imbecile! . . . You've allowed yourself to be led away by that other idiot who's standing beside you!" If you could have seen Rinaldo! He jumped right over the table and seized hold of Tore by the collar of his shirt. We had to pull them apart.

That evening after they had gone, we did not breathe a word and we all left after a few minutes. Next evening we met again, but now our old gaiety was gone. We noticed, on this occasion, that several of the rings had vanished and some of the watches too. After two evenings we none of us had any jewellery left, and we were duller than ever. A week went by and then, with one excuse and another,

we ceased to meet at all. It was all finished, and, as one knows, when things are finished they don't begin again: no one likes warmed-up soup. Later on I heard that Rinaldo had married Lucrezia; I was told that, at the church, she was more thickly covered with jewellery than a statue of the Madonna. And Tore? I saw him at his garage a short time ago. He had a ring on his finger, but it was not of gold and it had no diamond in it: it was one of those silver rings that mechanics wear.

TABOO

ALESSANDRO subjected me to that disgraceful scene in a restaurant; and two weeks later, as he was riding his motor-bicycle along the Via Cassia, he collided with a lorry and was killed on the spot. Giulio started hitting me as we came out of the cinema, and barely three days afterwards, at the bathing-place in the Tiber, he caught that terrible disease which comes from the sewers and was gone in a few hours. Remo said to me, in the Via Ripetta: "You damned fool, you idiot, you imbecile"; and shortly afterwards, as he was turning into the Via dell' Oca, he slipped on a piece of orange-peel and broke his thigh. Mario made a rude gesture at me, at a football match, and almost immediately, it might be said, became aware that his pocket-book had been stolen. These four cases —others too, which I won't mention for fear of becoming monotonous—convinced me, that year, that I was under the protection of a mysterious force which inflicted death, or at any rate punishment, upon anyone who opposed me. Please note that it was not a question of the evil eye. A person who has the evil eye does harm without any motive at all, haphazard, scattering disaster as a water-sprinkler scatters water: there's no rhyme nor reason about it. No; I felt that, though I was a man of no importance, neither handsome, nor strong, nor rich (I am an assistant in a draper's shop), nor, indeed, particularly well endowed in any way, I was protected by a super-

natural force, owing to which no one could harm me with impunity. You will say this was presumption. Well, if that is so, please explain the coincidence of all those deaths and disasters happening to people who wished to get the upper hand of me. Explain to me why, when I found myself in some sort of embarrassment and called upon this same force, it came at once, like a little dog, to my assistance and punished the imprudent person who had dared to set himself against me. Explain to me finally . . . but never mind. All you need to know is that I had got the idea into my head, at that time, that I bore a charmed life, as if through some magic power.

One summer day we decided, Grazia and I, to go and spend Sunday at Ostia. There were three assistants in our draper's shop: Grazia, I and a newcomer called Ugo. The last, to tell the truth, was a type I did not at all like: tall, athletic, self-assured, with a face like a boxer's, broken-nosed and prominent-jawed. Ugo had a way of throwing down a piece of cloth on the counter, unfolding it and snapping it between two of his fingers, looking, not at his customer, but through the glass door of the shop at the people passing in the street, which really got on my nerves; and, when a buyer expressed some doubt, instead of trying to persuade him, he would put on his forceful manner—that is, he would shut himself up in a contemptuous, disapproving silence; or he would say, outright, in a dry tone of voice: "What you want is something more ordinary," and go and replace the stuff on the shelf. He aimed, in fact, at intimidating the buyer; and indeed the buyer would almost always call him back, repentantly, re-examine the stuff and make a purchase. But whenever I tried to imitate him—possibly because I had not Ugo's physical presence nor his impudence either—people used to tell me that I had bad manners, that the manager would be well advised to give me the sack, and things like that. And so, after a few unsuccessful attempts, I went back to my own manner, which is smooth, obsequious, honeyed, full of insinuations and complacencies.

Grazia did not like Ugo; so, at least, she assured me several times: "That man! . . . Goodness gracious! He's a horror. . . . He looks like a Negro." When Ugo, however, came up to us after we had made our arrangements for Ostia and asked us, in his usual arrogant tone: "Well,

what nice plan have you got for Sunday?" she, wriggling and smiling and puffing herself out with coquettishness, answered immediately: "Why don't you come too, Ugo?" You can imagine Ugo; he accepted at once, and even went so far as to say, with a protective air, that he would arrange to bring a girl with him, so that there would be one for each of us. But he said it in a certain sort of way, so that I was left in uncertainty: as though he really meant that *his* girl was Grazia and that he would be bringing the other one for me.

On the Sunday we all met, at the time agreed, at the San Paolo station, where the crowd was beyond belief. Grazia was making her first appearance in a new, pale blue dress which went well with her fair hair; I myself was laden with packages, having bought the provisions for our lunch; Ugo was dressed in a dandified manner, in delicate greenish grey; and there too was Ugo's girl, by name Clementina. The suspicion I had had at the shop was, moreover, immediately confirmed when Ugo, authoritatively, took Grazia by the arm and said to Clementina and me: "Now, you two, don't you go and sneak off. . . . Be sure you don't lose sight of us when the time comes to leave." Grazia laughed and cuddled delightedly up against him. I took a look at Clementina. She was, indeed, just the right girl for me—that is, of course, according to the idea that Ugo had formed of my personality—a good sort of girl, white and plump, with cow-like hips and bosom and a stupid face, also of the bovine type: all she needed was a bell hung round her neck. She said to me with a smile, as she looked at Ugo and Grazia: "You can see how fond they are of each other, those two, can't you?" Perhaps this was meant as an invitation to behave likewise. Instead of which I answered, acidly, keeping at a distance: "Oh, really? . . . You don't say so. . . . Why, I had never noticed it."

The train came in and Ugo, of course, was the first to get in, goodness knows how, amongst that shouting, wrangling crowd; the first, too, to appear at a window, with that unpleasant face of his, shouting: "I've got four places; now you can get in at your leisure." We got in and sat down, one couple facing the other, and the train started. It is no exaggeration to say that, during the whole journey, I never for one moment took my eyes off the

other two: I just could not help it. Ugo, by now, had taken complete possession of Grazia. At one moment he was talking to her in a whisper, making her laugh and blush; at another, jokingly as it were, he was embracing her; and then again, pretending he was doing nothing at all, he would stroke and caress her. Grazia, like a real shameless woman, made no objection; all she did was to wriggle like an eel and rub herself against him. But what hurt me most was that they should behave in that way just as if I had not been there, entirely ignoring my presence. If only I could have paid them back by behaving in the same way with Clementina, so as to counterbalance Ugo's conduct! But, apart from the fact that she didn't attract me, Clementina did not appear to want me to pay court to her: she was asleep, with her head thrown back, her mouth open, and her hands in her lap.

At Ostia we went to the bathing establishment and undressed, in turn, in a cabin. Once we were all four in bathing-costumes, the differences between us became even more apparent. Grazia had a lovely, slim figure, with long, strong legs and a well-developed bust; Clementina, on the other hand, looked like a pillow tied round the middle, all hips and bosom, without waist and without neck. Between Ugo and me, moreover, the contrast was even more evident. He had the body of a wrestler, muscular, firm, brown, broad in the shoulders and narrow in the hips, his bathing-slip seemed glued to his buttocks and his dark-haired thighs quivered; whereas I, on the other hand, was small, with thin legs, a body with no muscle on it, and skinny arms—a veritable spider. Ugo, of course, at once seized Grazia by the hand; and off they went, running across the burning sand towards the sea, into which they plunged together with their heads down. "What a fine-looking pair they are!" said Clementina, who seemed to be doing all she could to embitter me. And now the two of them, out there in the sea, were splashing water over each other and pushing and shoving each other, and then Ugo took up Grazia in his arms and Grazia clung round his neck and laughed. I asked Clementina whether she wanted to bathe and she answered yes, certainly, with pleasure, but she wished to stay near the edge, as she could not swim. And so we had our bathe in two feet of dirty, warm water, amongst crying, screaming children

who threw balls to each other, while their nurses and mothers called to them by name and the radio at the bath-house blared incessantly the old song: *Il mare è sempre blu, come quando c'eri tu.* . . . Meanwhile Ugo and Grazia were swimming far out, like real athletes, and were almost out of sight.

At that moment, without forethought, in a perfectly natural way, it came into my head that Ugo would be drowned that day. I thought of this quite passively, as a thing inevitable and just: he had done me wrong, therefore he had to die. The thought restored, all of a sudden, my peace of mind. I went over to Clementina, who was standing in the water clinging with both hands to the safety rope, and said: "Ugo is one of those people who show off, and who then get cramp and drown . . . and then they bring them back unconscious to the beach and try artificial respiration on them." She looked at me, not understanding what I meant, and said: "But surely he's a very good swimmer?" Shaking my head, I replied "He's a very good swimmer, I don't deny that. . . . But he's just the type of man who finishes his Sunday outing lying on the sand while someone gives him artificial respiration . . . you mark my words."

After some time Grazia and Ugo came out of the water and started running up and down the beach, in order to dry themselves, so they said. They chased each other, caught each other with outflung arms, threw little balls of sand at each other, fell together on to the ground. I gazed fixedly at them as I stood beside Clementina, who still clung to the rope, and I seemed to see Ugo throwing himself into the sea and being seized by cramp, then beginning to gesticulate wildly and then drowning; soon they brought him to land and gave him artificial respiration. It was not certain that he was going to die; however, I was not sorry to think that, for one hour at least, he should hover, as they say, between life and death. In the meantime Ugo and Grazia had finished drying themselves and Ugo came and suggested that we should go out in a boat. Clementina at once declared that she would not go because she did not know how to swim; so we three got into a boat, with myself at the oars and Ugo and Grazia sitting side by side in the stern.

I started rowing gently, over that calm and tedious

sea, in the burning sun, my eyes fixed all the time upon them as though I hoped that all the poison that lay in my looks might make them feel ashamed and cause them to be more discreet. But my efforts were wasted: just as in the train, a short time before, so now they went on rubbing up against one another and making jokes, as though I had been a hired boatman. In fact Ugo, wishing to emphasize the situation, said to me, in a burlesque sort of manner: "If you don't mind, my good man, please pull with your left; otherwise we shall run into that raft." This at last made me lose patience, and I answered: "I say, Ugo, has no one ever told you what an ill-mannered boor you are?" He sat up straight and asked: "Wha-a-a-t?"—drawing out the *a*, as much as to say: "What do I hear? Do I hear aright?" Still rowing, I went on: "Yes, a boor and a half-wit. . . . Has no one ever told you?" "What's wrong with you?" he demanded raising his voice. "What's wrong with *me*," I said coldly, "is that *you* are a first-rate blackguard." "Be careful what you say." "I'm saying what I think, which is that you are a blackguard and a brute." "Be careful now, don't try being funny with *me*." As he said this, he rose to his feet and hit me hard, high up on the chest. I let go of the oars, jumped to my feet too, and was just going to hit him back; but he was too quick, and seized hold of my wrist with two fingers that seemed made of steel. We were struggling now, both of us standing up, while Grazia, still seated, screamed and implored us to stop. At a particularly violent movement on our part the boat, which was low and narrow, upset, and we all fell into the water.

We were not far from the shore, and I swear that, as I was falling, I said contentedly to myself: "Now he'll get cramp and drown . . . and he'll die, like Alessandro and Giulio." In the meantime the boat was drifting away, upside down, with the oars floating in the water; and we all three swam clear of it. "Idiot!" Ugo shouted at me. Grazia, as though nothing had happened, was swimming off in the direction of the beach. "You're an idiot and a hypocrite too," I answered; and as I said this some water got into my mouth. But by this time Ugo was taking no further notice of me; he was swimming off to join Grazia. I also started swimming towards the shore, thinking all the time of the cramp that would soon drag

him down to the bottom, when suddenly I felt a sharp pain all down my right side, from my shoulder right down to my foot, and realized that it was I who was being attacked by the cramp, not Ugo. It all happened in an instant and in that instant I lost my head: the pain did not stop, I began gesticulating wildly, I was unable to breathe, I had a terrible feeling of fear, I uttered a cry and the water came into my mouth. "Help!" I shouted, and swallowed some more water. The cramp continued all the time and I went under and came up again; then I cried "help!" again and went under once more, swallowing water all the time. I should, in short, have been drowned if a hand had not finally grasped me by the arm, while a voice—Ugo's voice—said to me: "Keep still, and I'll get you to shore." Then I closed my eyes and I think I fainted.

When I came round, after I don't know how long, I felt the burning sand of the beach under my back. Someone had hold of me by the wrists and was working my arms up and down; someone else, squatting beside me, was massaging my chest and stomach. There was a great cloud of dust in the air, the sunlight was dazzling, and all round me was a forest of sunburned, hairy legs: their owners were watching me die. I heard somebody say: "Seems to me he's done for"; and somebody else remarked: "They want to show off, and that's what happens: they drown themselves." I felt blown out with water and my head was too heavy for me, and meanwhile my two arms were going up and down like the handles of a pair of bellows, and then a great rage swept over me and I said, as I tried to disengage myself: "Leave me alone. . . . Go to hell"; and then I fainted again.

I do not wish to say any more about that ill-fated day. But a week later, at the shop, at a moment when Ugo was some distance off, Grazia said to me in a low voice: "You know why it was that you almost got drowned at Ostia last Sunday?" "No; why was it?" "Ugo explained to me. . . . He says there's a mysterious force which protects him: anyone who opposes him may even get killed. . . . Well, he says he's taboo . . . but I should very much like to know what taboo means?"

"Taboo," I replied, after a moment of hesitation, "taboo means—when a thing or a person is sacred."

She said nothing because at that moment Ugo came back carrying a roll of cotton material, which he unfolded with his usual snap of the fingers, saying at the same time: "This is what you require, Signora." But from Grazia's glances I realized that she was properly in love. My goodness!—a man who is not only handsome, strong and young, but, into the bargain, taboo!

I DON'T SAY NO . . . ?

IN order to make you understand Adele's character, I wish simply to relate what happened on our wedding night: "red sky in the morning . . .", as they say. Well then, after the dinner at a restaurant in Trastevere, after the toasts, the poems, the good wishes, after embraces and tears on the part of my mother-in-law, we went off to my own house, which is above my ironmonger's shop in the Via dell'Anima. We were married now, and we were both of us a little shy; and when we were in the bedroom, I started by taking off my jacket and, as I hung it over the back of a chair, I said, more or less to break the ice: "They say it brings luck. . . . Did you notice?—we were thirteen at table." Adele had taken off the new shoes that hurt her feet and was standing in front of the wardrobe looking-glass, gazing at herself. She answered at once, in a pleased sort of way, as though what I had said had quite dispelled her timidity. "No, really, Gino," she said, "we were twelve. . . . Ten guests and we two—that makes twelve." Now it happened that I had counted the people present at the restaurant—so as to be correct, also, in giving the orders; and when I counted them I had seen that we were indeed thirteen, so that I had actually said to Lodovico, one of our marriage witnesses: "There are thirteen of us. . . . I hope it won't bring us bad luck." And he had answered: "Not at all, in fact it brings good luck." I sat down on the edge of the bed and began pulling off my trousers, at the same time replying calmly: "You're wrong . . . there were thirteen of us. . . . I par-

ticularly noticed it, and I pointed it out to Lodovico too." Adele, at the moment, did not answer because her head and half her body were muffled up in the dress she was pulling off. But the moment she was free of it, without giving herself time to draw breath, she said briskly: "You counted wrong. . . . There were thirteen of us in the street —but then Meo went away and there were only twelve." I was in my drawers by this time, and, I don't know why, all of a sudden I got angry. "Get along with you, you and your twelve," I cried. "And what has Meo got to do with it? . . . I tell you I counted the whole party *in the restaurant.*" "Well then," she said, going and putting her dress into the wardrobe, "it means that, when you counted them, you had already had a bit too much to drink . . . that's all there is to it." "What d'you mean—too much to drink? . . . I suppose I'd had a couple of glasses altogether, including the *spumante.* . . ." "Anyhow," she said, "there were twelve of us . . . and you don't remember because you're drunk *now* and your memory deceives you." "Who's drunk?—what d'you mean? . . . There were thirteen of us." "I tell you there were twelve." "Thirteen." "Twelve." We were face to face now, in the middle of the room, I in my drawers and she in her petticoat. I caught hold of her by the arms and shouted right into her face: "Thirteen"; but then I suddenly changed my mind and murmured, as I tried to embrace her: "Thirteen or twelve—it doesn't matter. . . . Give me a kiss." But she, falling back on to the bed and not refusing the kiss, whispered right between my lips, so to speak, just as they were meeting hers: "Yes; but there were twelve of us." I jumped away from her into the middle of the room, and cried: "This is a bad beginning. . . .You're my wife and you have to obey me. . . . If I tell you there were thirteen of us, thirteen of us there were, and you're not to contradict." Then she got up from the bed and shouted violently: "I'm your wife—or rather, I shall be. . . . But there were twelve of us." "Take that, then. . . . There were thirteen of us." And thus the first slap was given, and a good, resounding slap it was. Adele, for a moment, appeared dazed; then she ran to the door of the sitting-room, opened it, and shouted from the threshold: "There were twelve of us. . . . And leave me alone . . . you disgust me." Then she disappeared. After a moment's as-

tonishment I recovered myself, went to the door, called, knocked, implored: not a sound. The end of it was that I spent my wedding night all alone, dozing, half-dressed, on the bed; and she, I suppose, did the same thing on the divan in the sitting-room. Next day, by common agreement, we went to see her mother and asked her how many of us there had been. It turned out that there had really been fourteen of us, owing to two little boys who were so small that they had slipped down off their chairs and started playing under the table. When I had made my count, one of them was still sitting at the table; by the time Adele had counted, they had both vanished. So we were both of us right; but Adele, as a wife, was wrong.

There were countless occasions, after that first time, upon which Adele displayed this niggardly side of her character. She had a mania for arguing about every trifle; if I said white she said black, and she never gave in, never admitted she was in the wrong. If I started describing these occasions, there would be no end to it: as, for example, the time when she maintained for a whole day that she had never received her housekeeping money, and then, after she had argued about it for twenty-four hours on end, there the money was, on the sill of the little window in the lavatory, taking the fresh air like a rose in a glass. Of course the discussion continued, for she maintained that it was I who had put the money on the window-sill; whereas I proved to her, by a demonstration of facts, that this was impossible and that she herself had, in fact, gone to that obscure little spot *after* she had received the money, not before. Or that other time when, niggardly as ever, she insisted that Alessandro, the barman at the café opposite, had four children, whereas I knew perfectly well that he had only three; and so we went on arguing for a whole week, because the barman was away; and then he came back and we discovered that he had had three children when the discussion began, and four now, because one had been born in the meantime. It was all nonsense, of course, and, as always happens in these matters, sometimes I was right and sometimes she was right; but what I tried in vain to make her understand was that being right was of no importance, but that her vice for arguing over every trifle would end by ruining everything. "You don't want

a wife," she replied, "you want a slave." And so, through this continual arguing, our relations were already strained; and as soon as I said something even of the most unquestionable kind, as for example: "It's a sunny day today," I could already feel myself getting angry at the very idea that she might contradict me; and I would look at her, and indeed, sure enough, she would say without hesitation: "Oh no, Gino, there's no sun today . . . it's all cloudy." Then I would take my hat and rush out of the house, for if I had stayed any longer I should have burst with rage.

One day about this time, as I was going along the Via Ripetta, I met Giulia, a girl whom I had courted shortly before I got to know Adele. I had soon grown tired of her, at that time, because she did not seem to me independent enough and whatever I said she agreed with me and never said I was wrong, even when a blind man could have seen how wrong I was. But, now that I had married an independent woman and was getting the full enjoyment of her, I regretted Giulia who was so sweet and so compliant, and I could have kicked myself for having preferred Adele. It gave me a great pleasure to meet her that morning, if only because of the difference between her character and Adele's; and so, while she tried to get away by saying she had to go to the market and do her shopping, I kept her talking, simply for the pleasure of seeing her agree with me in everything, and still retain her sweetness, and never once contradict me. Partly to put her to the test, I said: "Well, are you sorry you treated me so badly? Have you realized that I was better than a good many other men? Tell me, why was it you didn't want me?" Now I knew perfectly well that this was not true: it had been *I* who had left *her,* and the reason I gave was, precisely, that I did not care for women like her, who were too docile. But I wanted to see what answer she would make to this quite false and unjust accusation. She, poor girl, hearing me speak like that, opened her eyes very wide in surprise. Certainly, for a moment, she was tempted to reply that it was *I* who had treated her badly—which was true—and that it was *I* who had deserted *her*. But then, instead, her character revealed itself. She said, in that sweet voice of hers: "Gino . . . there must have been a misunderstanding. . . . Never,

never should I have left you . . . I was so very fond of you." You will notice she did not accuse me of telling a lie, as Adele would certainly have done; she was trying to exculpate herself, but, to please me, was admitting that a little of the fault had perhaps been on her side. I gave a bitter laugh at the thought of the folly I had been guilty of in preferring Adele; then, fondling her cheek, I exclaimed: "I know it was all my fault. . . . Alas, there was no misunderstanding; it was all my fault. . . . I said that without really meaning it . . . to see how you would answer." Then I fondled her cheek again, making her blush with pleasure, and ran off. But before I turned the corner I looked round: she was still standing there, on the pavement, her shopping-bag hanging from her arm, gazing at me in bewilderment.

It was the end of May and the following day we went, Adele and I, on my motor-scooter to Fregene, to have our first bathe. We found the beach deserted; the sky was blue and the sunshine dazzling, but there was a wind blowing strongly at ground level, a stinging, sand-laden wind. The sea near the shore was nothing but waves, green and white waves riding on top of each other and clashing together; further out, it was streaked with a blue that was almost black and flecked here and there with white crests. Adele said she wanted to go out in a boat, and I, although the sea was not in a kindly mood—in order not to refuse her and hear myself being told, inevitably, that it was as smooth as oil—hired a boat and had it put into the water. I was in my bathing-costume, but Adele was fully dressed, and I—once again for fear of an argument—had not insisted on her undressing. The bathing attendant gave us a push, I grasped the oars and started rowing vigorously against the oncoming waves. They were not big waves, and, as we came out beyond the sandbanks, I rowed more gently; however, I was very careful to meet the waves head-on because, if I turned sideways, there was a likelihood that the boat, a mere nutshell, would capsize. Adele was sitting in the bows, going up and down with the waves; and all at once, as I looked at her and saw her fully dressed and remembered that I had not dared to advise her to take her clothes off, I felt angry and was seized with the desire to tell her I had met Giulia. And so, as I rowed, I gave her an account of how I

had wished to put Giulia's character to the test and of how she had not contradicted me. Adele listened to me as the boat went up and down with the waves, and finally said, calmly: "You're wrong. . . . The fault was entirely on her side. . . . It was *she* who left *you*."

I pulled strongly at the oars to encounter an exceptionally big wave and replied angrily: "Who told you that, I should like to know? . . . It was I who gave her to understand, one evening, that I did not feel I wanted her any more. . . . I even remember the place, on the Lungotevere."

There was a tone of malignance in Adele's voice as, with her hair fluttering in the wind, she answered: "As usual, you remember wrong. . . . It was she who left you. . . . She said that you have too quarrelsome a character, as indeed you have, and that she didn't feel she could live with you."

"But who told you that?"

"She told me herself . . . a few days afterwards."

"It wasn't true. . . . She said that in order to hide her disappointment—the fox and the grapes."

"It was she, Gino; don't be obstinate . . . and I had the confirmation of it from her mother."

"I tell you it's not true. . . . It was I who left *her*."

"No, it wasn't."

I don't know what devil took possession of me at that moment. I would have endured to be contradicted in anything else but that. I suppose my masculine pride also came into the question. Anyhow, I let go of the oars and jumped to my feet, crying: "It was *I*, I tell you. . . . And that's enough; I don't want any more arguing. . . . If you say anything more, I'll hit you over the head with an oar."

"You just try it," she said. "But you're getting angry, and that means you're in the wrong. . . . You know it was she who left you."

"No, it was *I* who left *her*."

I was standing in the middle of the boat now, and shouting—partly in order to make myself heard above the noise of the waves. The boat was heaving up and down, with oars abandoned, and, without my noticing it, had worked itself sideways. Adele, I remember, also jumped to her feet suddenly and shouted "It was *she*" right into my face, putting up her hands to her mouth to

form a sort of megaphone. At the same moment a massive wall of water, green as glass, white-crested, rose above us and, breaking right into the boat, overwhelmed us. I myself was thrown overboard, thinking, at the same time, that, by a stroke of luck, the boat had not overturned; I immediately sank, dragged down, feet foremost, by the swirling waters. I went right down, swallowed a certain quantity of water, and then came to the surface again, fighting against the current and calling to Adele. But, as I looked round, I saw that the boat was already some distance away, and that it was empty, and that there was no sign of Adele. I again called her name and started swimming towards the boat, without knowing what I was going to do. But with every wave the boat went a little further away, and each time I called to Adele my mouth was filled with water, and all the time I was thinking that it was useless to go on pursuing the boat, seeing that Adele was no longer in it. Finally I gave it up and began swimming in a circle, searching the water for Adele. But Adele was not to be seen; the only thing to be seen was the waves chasing each other towards the shore, and now my strength was beginning to fail. I was seized with the fear of drowning, and I started swimming towards the beach. Before long I touched bottom with my feet and, although I was still a long way from the shore, I stopped and began shouting, and soon, in fact, I saw a raft push off and come towards me. While it was coming I looked round, searching the sea for any sign of Adele; but the sea was deserted as far as the eye could reach, except for the empty boat drifting out to sea with its oars abandoned, and I began to weep, saying "Adele, Adele" over and over again, in a low voice, as if to myself. It seemed to me that the noise of the waves answered me: "It was she," as though the voice of the vanished Adele still hovered in the air and still contradicted me. Then the attendants arrived with the raft and we searched for more than three hours, but Adele's body was never found, either that morning or during the days that followed.

And so I was left a widower. A year went by, and then I summoned up courage, and went to see Giulia. Her mother showed me into the dining-room, and, when she came in, I said to her: "Giulia, I've come to ask you

whether you will be my wife." She blushed with pleasure and answered in her gentle voice: "I don't say no . . . but I must talk to Mother about it." I was struck by that first remark of hers, and then I remembered it again later, as an omen: "I don't say no."

Well, we were married; and if you want to meet a truly harmonious couple, come and see us. Giulia has always remained exactly as she was that morning when she gave me the answer: "I don't say no."

THE FILM TEST

SERAFINO and I are friends although our work has taken us far apart from one another; he is a chauffeur to an industrialist and I am a film cameraman and photographer. We are quite different in physical appearance too: he has fair, curly hair and a pink, child-like face, and his eyes, of a staring blue, are set flush with his face; whereas I am swarthy, with the serious face of an adult man, and deep-set, dark eyes. But the real difference lies in our characters: Serafino is a born liar, whereas I am quite unable to tell lies. Well, one Sunday Serafino let me know that he needed me: from his tone I suspected some sort of embarrassment, for Serafino constantly gets into trouble through his mania for cutting a dash. I went to keep the appointment at a café in the Piazza Colonna; and a moment later, there he was, arriving with Lie no. 1 —the very expensive, "special model" car belonging to his employer, whom I knew to be away from Rome. He waved his hand to me from some distance off, in a slightly conceited way, just as though the car had been his own, and then went and parked it. I looked at him as he came towards me: he was dressed in a foppish kind of way, in short, narrow trousers of yellow corduroy, a jacket with a slit at the back, and a coloured handkerchief round his neck. A feeling of distaste came over me, for some reason, and, as he sat down, I remarked somewhat acidly: "You look like a millionaire."

He answered emphatically: "Today I *am* a millionaire"; and I did not at once understand what he meant. "What about the car?" I persisted. "Have you won a football pool?"

"It's the boss's new car," he answered indifferently. For a moment he sat thinking, and then went on: "Listen, Mario, two young ladies are coming here shortly . . . as you see, I thought of you too . . . one for each of us. . . . They're girls of good family, the daughters of a railway engineer. . . . You're a film producer—is that understood? Don't give me away."

"And you—what are you?"

"I've already told you—a millionaire."

I said nothing, but rose to my feet. "What are you doing? Are you going away?" he said in alarm.

"Yes, I'm going," I replied; "you know I don't like lies. . . . Good-bye . . . enjoy yourself."

"Wait, wait . . . You'll spoil my plan."

"Don't worry, I won't spoil anything."

"Wait a moment; these girls want to meet you."

"But I don't want to meet *them.*"

In short, we argued for some time, he sitting down and I standing in front of him. In the end, since I am a good friend, I agreed to stay. However, I warned him: "I don't guarantee to play this game of yours to the bitter end." But he was paying no further attention to me. Beaming with pleasure, he said: "Here they are."

At first I could see nothing but hair. It looked as though they each of them had on their heads a large ball made of thick, frizzy, puffed-out hair. Then with some difficulty I caught sight, under these two vast masses, of their faces, peaked and thin, like two little birds peeping out of a nest. In figure, they were both of them supple and full of curves, all hips and bosom, with tiny wasp waists that could have gone through a napkin-ring. I thought they must be twins because they were dressed in the same way: tartan skirts, black jumpers, red shoes and bags. Serafino rose ceremoniously and performed the introductions: "My friend Mario, the film producer; Signorina Iris, Signorina Mimosa."

I could see them better, now that they were sitting down. From the careful attention he showed her, I realized that Serafino had reserved Iris for himself, leaving

me Mimosa. They were not twins: Mimosa, who was clearly over thirty, had a more hungry-looking face, a longer nose, a bigger mouth and a more pronounced chin than Iris, and she was, in fact, almost ugly. Iris, on the other hand, must have been about twenty and was charming. I noticed, moreover, that they both had red, chapped hands—more like working women than young ladies. In the meantime Serafino, who with their arrival seemed to have become quite silly, was making conversation: what a pleasure it was to see them, how brown they were, where had they been for the summer? . . .

Mimosa began: "At Ven——" But by that time Iris had answered: "At Viareggio." Then they looked at each other and started laughing. Serafino asked: "What are you laughing at?"

"Don't take any notice," said Mimosa; "my sister is silly. . . . We were first at Venice, in an hotel, and then at Viareggio, in a little villa we have there."

I knew she was lying because she lowered her eyes as she spoke. She was like me: I can't tell lies when I am looking someone in the face. Then she went on, coolly: "Signor Mario, you're a film producer. . . . Serafino told us you would give us a film test."

I was disconcerted; I looked at Serafino, but he turned away his head. "Well, you know, Signorina," I said, "a film test is like a little film, it's not a thing that can be done at a moment's notice. . . . It needs a director, a cameraman, a studio. . . . Serafino doesn't quite understand. . . . But certainly, one of these days . . ."

"One of these days means never."

"No, no, Signorina, I assure you . . ."

"Come on, be a good, kind man, do give us a test." She was wriggling all over now, and had taken my arm and was pressing up against me. I realized that Serafino had turned her head with this story about a film test, and I tried again to explain to her that a film test was not a thing that could be done in a moment, there and then. Gradually she came, at length, to understand this; and she relaxed her hold on my arm. Then she said to her sister, who was chattering to Serafino: "I told you it was just a story. . . . Well, what shall we do? Shall we go home?"

Iris, who was not expecting this, was ill at ease. She

said, with some embarrassment: "We might stay with them . . . until this evening."

"Yes," urged Serafino, "let's all stay together. . . . Let's go out in the car."

"You've got a car?" enquired Mimosa, almost reconciled.

"Yes, there it is."

She followed the movement of his hand, saw the car and immediately changed her tone. "Let's go, then. . . . Sitting in a café bores me." We all four rose to our feet. Iris went in front with Serafino; and Mimosa walked beside me, saying: "You're not offended, are you? But you know, we're sick and tired of promises. . . . Now, you *will* give me the test, won't you?"

So all my explanations had served no purpose at all: she still wanted the test. I made no answer, but got into the car and sat down beside her, at the back, while Serafino and Iris sat in front. "Where shall we go?" asked Serafino.

Mimosa had now seized hold of my arm again, and had taken my hand in hers and was squeezing it. In a low voice, she tried to coax me: "Come on, do be kind; tell him to go to the studio and we'll do the test." For a moment, from sheer anger, I sat silent; and she took advantage of this to add, still in a low voice: "Look, if you give me a test, I'll give you a kiss."

I had a sudden inspiration, and suggested: "Let's go to Serafino's house. . . . He has a lovely big house. . . . Then I'll be able to take a better look at you both, and I'll tell you if there's a chance of giving you this test."

I noticed that Serafino threw me a look of reproach: he might pass off his employer's car as his own; but he had not yet had the courage to bring anyone into the house. He tried, in fact, to make objections: "Wouldn't it be better to go for a nice drive?"; but the girls, Mimosa especially, insisted: they didn't want a drive, they wanted to discuss the question of the film test. So he resigned himself and we went off at full speed towards the Parioli district, where the house was. All the way there, Mimosa continued to press up against me, talking to me in a low, insinuating, caressing voice. I did not listen to her; but every now and then I caught that oft-repeated word, which she reiterated like a hammer striking a nail: "The

test . . . You'll give me a test? . . . If we do the test . . ."

We reached the Parioli district, with its empty streets between rows of expensive houses, all balcony and window. We reached the residence of Serafino's employer, with its black marble entrance-hall and its glass and mahogany lift. We went up to the third floor and, on entering, found ourselves in the dark, with a smell of naphthalene and stuffiness everywhere. "I'm sorry, but I've been away," Serafino informed us; "the flat's all upside down." We went into the sitting-room; Serafino threw open the windows; we sat down on a divan upholstered in grey cloth, in front of a piano covered in dust-sheets which were fastened with safety-pins. Then, putting my plan into action, I said: "We two are going to take a look at you now; you must just walk up and down the room for a bit. . . . Then I shall be able to get an idea for the test."

"Are we to show our legs?" asked Mimosa.

"No, no, not your legs . . . just walk about, that's enough."

Obediently they started walking up and down in front of us, on the wax-polished wooden floor. No one could say they were not graceful, with those two big heads of hair, and their well-developed hips and busts and their thin waists. But I noticed that they had large, ugly feet as well as hands. And their legs were slightly crooked, stiff and clumsy in shape. They were, in fact, the sort of girls to whom film-producers do not give even a walking-on part. In the meantime they went on walking up and down, and each time they met in the middle of the room, they started laughing. All at once I called out: "Halt! That's enough. Sit down!"

They went and sat down and looked at me with anxious faces. "I'm sorry," I said drily, "but you won't do."

"Why?"

"I'll tell you why, at once," I explained seriously. "For my films, I don't need refined, well-educated, distinguished, ladylike girls such as you. . . . What I need is working-class girls—girls who can even, if required, speak a few ugly words, girls who move in a provoking way, girls who are, in fact, awkward, ill-bred, unpolished. . . . You, on the other hand, are the daughters

of an engineer, you come of a good family. . . . You're not what I'm looking for."

I looked at Serafino: he had sunk back on the divan and appeared stupefied. "But what d'you mean?" persisted Mimosa. "We can surely pretend to be working-class girls, can't we?"

"No, you can't. There are some things that no one can do who isn't born to them."

A short silence ensued. I had cast my hook and I was sure the fish would swallow it. And indeed, a moment later, Mimosa rose and went and whispered in her sister's ear. The latter did not appear pleased, but finally she made a gesture of consent. Then Mimosa placed her hands on her hips and swayed across to me; she gave me a punch in the chest and said: "Come on, old sport, who d'you think you're talking to?"

If I were to say that she was transformed, it would be saying too much. In actual fact, it was herself, her own natural self. I replied, laughing: "To the daughters of a railway engineer."

"On the contrary, we're exactly what you want—two ordinary working-class girls. . . . Iris is in service, and I'm a nurse. . . ."

"And how about the villa at Viareggio?"

"There isn't one. We got our little bit of sunburn at Ostia."

"But why did you tell so many lies?"

Iris said naïvely: "I didn't want to . . . but Mimosa says you have to throw dust in people's eyes."

"Anyhow, if we hadn't told lies," Mimosa remarked flatly, "Signor Serafino wouldn't have introduced us to you . . . so it served its purpose. . . . Well, now, what about that film test?"

"We've done it already," I replied, laughing, "and it served to show that you're a couple of nice working-class girls. . . . Besides, lie for lie: I'm not a film producer but an ordinary cameraman and photographer . . . and Serafino here, he's not the grand gentleman he pretends to be: he's a chauffeur."

I must admit that Mimosa took the blow magnificently. "Well, well, I was half expecting this," she said sadly; "we're unlucky . . . and if we meet a man with a car, of

course he turns out to be a chauffeur. . . . Come on, Iris."

At last Serafino roused himself. "Wait a moment," he said. "Where are you going?"

"We're going away, Mr. Liar."

All of a sudden I felt sorry for them, especially for Iris, who was so pretty and who seemed mortified and had tears in her eyes. I made a suggestion. "Listen to me," I said. "We've all four of us told lies . . . but I propose that we let bygones be bygones and all go to the pictures together. . . . What about it?"

A discussion followed. Iris wanted to accept; Mimosa, who was still offended, did not; Serafino, crestfallen, hadn't the courage to speak. But I persuaded Mimosa by saying, finally: "I'm a camerman, not a producer . . . but I can introduce Iris to an assistant director that I know. . . . It won't be a great recommendation, but it's better than nothing. It's no good for you, I'm afraid, but possibly something might be done about Iris."

So off we went to the pictures; but in a bus, not in the car. And Iris, in the cinema, pressed close up against Serafino, whom she liked in spite of his being both a liar and a chauffeur. Mimosa, on the other hand, kept to herself. And during an interval she said to me: "I'm more or less of a mother to Iris. . . . She *is* a pretty girl, isn't she? Now remember you made a promise and you must keep it . . . there'll be the devil to pay if you don't."

"It's only cowards who make promises and keep them," I said jokingly.

"You made a promise and you're going to keep it," said she; "Iris is to have her film test, and have it she shall."

THE GIRL FROM CIOCIARIA*

WHEN the Professor insisted, I kept on telling him, over and over again: "Now, be careful, Professor, they're

*Ciociaria is a country district to the south-east of Rome, of which Frosinone is the centre. The name is derived from *ciocia*, the shoe worn by the local peasants, which resembles the Roman sandal, being formed of a piece of leather fastened by straps round the calf of the leg.

simple girls . . . real country stuff. . . . Be careful what you're doing. . . . It would be better for you to find a Roman girl. . . . The girls from Ciociaria are real country girls, peasants, illiterate." It was this last word, particularly, that pleased the Professor. "Illiterate . . . that's exactly what's needed. . . . At least she won't read the comic strips. . . . Illiterate." The Professor was an old man, with a white pointed beard and moustaches, who taught at the high school. But his main occupation was ruins. Every Sunday, and other days too, he used to go off, here or there, to the Appian Way or the Forum or the Baths of Caracalla, explaining the ruins of Rome. And in his own home, books about ruins, and other books as well, were piled up as in a bookshop: they began at the front door, where there were quantities of them hidden behind some green curtains, and went on right through the house, in every passage and room and recess: they were everywhere except in the bathroom and the kitchen. His books were as precious to him as the smell of a rose, and woe betide anyone who touched them; and there were so many of them that it seemed impossible he could have read them all. And yet he could never have enough of them; and when he was not teaching or giving lessons at home or explaining the ruins, he would go off to the little markets where they sell second-hand books and rummage about on the barrows and always come home again with a parcel of books under his arm. He collected them, in fact, as little boys collect stamps. But why he should have been so crazy as to want a girl from my native village as a maid, was to me a mystery. He said they were more honest and didn't have silly ideas in their heads. He said it did him good to see the peasant women with their cheeks like red apples. He said they were good cooks. In the end, since not a day passed that he didn't put his head in at the porter's lodge, always going on about the illiterate girl from Ciociaria, I wrote home to my godfather about it, and he answered that he knew of exactly the right person—a girl from the neighbourhood of Vallecorsa whose name was Tuda and who was not yet twenty. However, my godfather told me in his letter, Tuda had one defect: she could neither read nor write. But I replied that was just what the Professor wanted—someone who was illiterate.

Tuda arrived in Rome one evening in company with my godfather, and I went to meet her at the station. I saw at first glance that she was of the proper *ciociaro* type, one of those women who are capable of doing a long day's digging without pausing to take breath, or of carrying a basket weighing half a hundredweight on their heads, up and down the mountain paths. She had red cheeks such as the Professor liked, a long tress of hair coiled round her head, black eyebrows which, joined together, formed a bar across her forehead, and a round face; and, when she laughed, she showed small white teeth, set very close together—which the women of Ciociaria clean by rubbing them with a mallow leaf. She was not dressed in the *ciociaro* fashion, it is true, but she had the walk of the *ciociaro* woman who is accustomed to planting the soles of her feet, in their heelless shoes, firmly on the ground, and she had also those muscular calves that look so fine with the straps of the sandals wound round them. She was carrying a little basket on her arm, and she said this was for me: in it were a dozen new-laid eggs wrapped in straw and covered with fig-leaves. I told her it would be better for her to give them to the Professor, so as to make a good impresson; but she answered that she hadn't thought about the Professor, because, being a gentleman, he would certainly have hens of his own. I started laughing, and so, with one question and another as we were going along in the tram, I discovered that she was a real savage: she had never seen a train, or a tram, or a house with six floors. Illiterate, in fact, just as the Professor wanted.

We reached the house and I first took her into the porter's lodge to introduce her to my wife; and then we went up in the lift to the Professor's flat. He came to open the door himself, because he had no servant and it was my wife who usually did the cleaning for him and a little bit of cooking. Tuda, as we went in, put the basket into his hands, saying: "Here, Professor, here you are, I've brought you some fresh eggs." I said to her: "You mustn't say *'tu'* to the Professor"; but the Professor encouraged her, saying: "No, you can go on calling me *'tu'*, my girl . . ."; and he explained to me that this *"tu"* was the Roman *"tu"*, the *"tu"* of the ancient Romans, who, like the people of Ciociaria, did not know

the modern *"lei"* form of address and treated everyone in an unpretending sort of way, as if they had all belonged to one family. The Professor then took Tuda into the kitchen, which was a big room, with a gas cooker, aluminium saucepans, and everything, in fact, that was necessary, and explained to her how it all worked. Tuda listened quietly and seriously to everything. Then, in her resonant voice, she said: "But I don't know how to cook."

The Professor said in surprise: "How d'you mean? . . . I was told you did know how to cook."

"At home in the country," she said, "I worked . . . I dug in the fields. We did a bit of cooking, of course, but just so as to have something to eat. . . . I've never had a kitchen like this."

"Where did you do the cooking?"

"In the hut."

"Well," said the Professor, tugging at his beard, "we cook here, too, so as to have something to eat. . . . Now, let's suppose you were going to cook me a dinner, for *me* to have something to eat; what would you do?"

She smiled and said: "I'd do you some macaroni and beans. . . . Then you'd have a glass of wine. . . . And then—oh well, perhaps a few nuts, or some dried figs."

"That's all, is it? . . . No second course?"

"What d'you mean, second course?"

"I mean, no second dish—no fish or meat?"

This time she burst into undisguised laughter. "But when you've eaten a plateful of macaroni and beans with bread, isn't that enough for you? What more d'you want? . . . Why, I used to dig all day long on a plate of macaroni and beans and some bread . . . and *you* don't even work."

"Oh yes, I do; I study and write; *I* work too."

"Well, well, you can study if you like . . . but it's us that do the real work."

In short, she could not be convinced that there was any necessity, as the Professor said there was, for a "second course". In the end, after long discussions, it was decided that my wife should come up and instruct Tuda in cooking for some time. Then we went on into the maid's bedroom, a good room looking out on the courtyard, with a bed, a chest-of-drawers and wardrobe. As she looked

round it, she said at once: "Shall I be sleeping alone?"

"Who d'you want to sleep with?"

"At home, we slept five in a room."

"This room is entirely for you."

Finally I left them, after I had exhorted her to pay careful attention and do her work well, since I was responsible not only to the Professor but also to my godfather who had sent her at my request. As I went out, I heard the Professor explaining to her: "Now mind, you must dust all these books every day with a feather-mop and a duster." She asked, then: "What d'you do with all these books? What use are they to you?" And he replied: "To me they are what your spade is to you, at home . . . I work with them." "Yes," she said, "but I have only one spade."

After that day the Professor used to come into the porter's lodge, every now and then, and give me news of Tuda. To tell the truth, he was no longer quite so pleased as he had been. One day he said to me: "She's a rustic, a real rustic. . . . D'you know what she did yesterday? She took a written sheet of paper off my desk, an exercise of one of my pupils, and used it for corking up the wine bottles." "Professor," I said, "I warned you . . . real country stuff." "Yes," he concluded, "but she's a dear girl . . . she's good and obliging . . . really a dear girl."

The dear girl, as he called her, did not take long to turn into a girl just like any other. She started, as soon as she got her wages, by getting herself a two-piece dress, so that she looked like a real young lady. Then she bought some high-heeled shoes. Then a handbag, in imitation crocodile. She also had her long tress of hair cut off—a great pity. She still, it is true, had cheeks as red as two apples, for these would not so quickly turn pale as did those of other girls who had been born in towns; and they were indeed a source of attraction, not only to the Professor. The first time I saw her with that wretched Mario, the chauffeur of the lady who lived on the third floor, I said to her: "Now be careful, he's not the right person for you. . . . The things he says to you, he says to all his girl friends." She answered: "He took me in the car yesterday, to Monte Mario." "Well, and what of it?" "It's lovely going in a car. . . . Besides, look what he

gave me." And she showed me a white-metal pin with a little elephant on it, of the kind the pedlars sell at the Campo di Fiori. "You're an ignorant girl," I told her, "and you don't understand that that man is leading you by the nose. . . . And what's more, he oughtn't to go out in the car on his own, with you. . . . If the Signora comes to hear of it, he'll get into trouble. . . . Now, you be careful; I tell you again, be careful." But she smiled and went on going out with Mario.

A couple of weeks went by, and then one day the Professor looked into the porter's lodge, called me aside and, lowering his voice, said to me: "I say, Giovanni—that girl is honest, isn't she?" "I'm sure she is, Professor," I said; "ignorant but honest." "It may be so," he said, unconvinced, "but five valuable books of mine have disappeared. . . . I shouldn't like . . ." I protested once again that it could not have been Tuda, and I was sure he would find the books again. But I was worried, I confess, and I decided to keep my eyes open. One evening, a few days later, I saw Tuda getting into the lift in company with Mario. He said he had to go up to the third floor to get his orders from the Signora—which was a lie, because the Signora had already gone out, more than an hour before, and he knew this. I let them go up, and then I myself took the lift and went straight up to the Professor's flat. It so happened that they had left the door ajar, so I went in, walked along the passage and heard the two of them talking in the study. I realized I had not been mistaken. Very slowly I approached and looked in at the door, and what did I see? Mario, who had climbed up on to a chair that was leaning against the book-case, was reaching up to a row of books close under the ceiling; and she, the little red-cheeked saint, was holding the chair for him and saying: "That one up there . . . that lovely big one . . . the lovely big one in the leather binding."

Then I stepped back outside the room and said: "Well done, Tuda. . . . Well done, both of you. . . . I've caught you now. . . . The Professor told me about this and I didn't believe him. . . . Well done indeed."

Have you ever seen a cat when someone throws a bucket of water at it out of a window? In just the same way, at the sound of my voice, did Mario jump down

and rush away, leaving me alone with Tuda. I gave her such a talking-to then that most girls would at least have burst into tears. But not at all; with *ciociaro* women it's quite a different thing. She listened to me with bowed head, without saying a word; then she raised her eyes, which were perfectly dry, and said: "Well, who's been robbing him? I always give him back the whole of the money that's left after I've done the shopping. . . . I don't do what other cooks do, who charge everything up twice over."

"You wretched girl. . . . Haven't you been stealing books? Isn't that called stealing?"

"But he's got such a lot of books."

"A lot or a little, you're not to touch them. . . . And now mind, if I catch you again, back home you go, in double-quick time."

At the time she refused, obstinately, to see reason or to admit, for a single moment, that she had been guilty of stealing. But a few days later, in she comes to the porter's lodge, with a parcel under her arm. "Here they are," she said, "here are the Professor's books. . . . I've brought them back, so he can't have anything to complain of now."

I told her she had done the right thing, and thought to myself that, after all, she was a good girl and that it had been entirely Mario's fault. I went up with her in the lift and then went into the flat with her, to help her put the books back in their places. Just at that moment, as we were undoing the parcel, in came the Professor.

"Professor," I said, "here are your books. . . . Tuda has brought them back. . . . She had lent them to a friend of hers to look at the pictures."

"That's all right, that's all right. . . . We won't mention it any more."

With his overcoat on and his hat still on his head he fell upon the books, took up one of them, opened it and cried out: "But these aren't my books."

"How d'you mean?"

"Mine were archaeological books," he went on, feverishly turning the pages of the other volumes, "and here are five volumes on law—and odd volumes at that."

"Will you kindly tell us what you've done?" I said to Tuda.

At this she protested violently. "It was five books that I took, and five books I've brought back. . . . What's the trouble? . . . I paid a lot of money for them—more than what they gave me when I sold them."

The Professor was so astonished that he looked at me and at Tuda open-mouthed, without saying a word. "Now just look," Tuda went on. "They're the same bindings—even better ones. . . . Look at them. . . . They weigh just the same, too; I had them weighed, and they came to four and a half kilos—just the same as yours."

The Professor, at this, started to laugh, but it was a bitter kind of laughter. "Books don't go by weight like—like veal," he said. "Each book is different from another. . . . What am I to do with these books? . . . Don't you see? Each book contains different things . . . by different authors."

Impossible to make her understand. She went on repeating, stubbornly: "Five there were, and five there are now. . . . They had bindings and these have bindings. . . . That's all I know."

To cut a long story short, the Professor sent her back into the kitchen, saying, "Go and do your cooking. . . . That's enough . . . I don't want to get irritated." Then, when she had gone, he said to me: "I'm sorry . . . she's a dear girl, but really a bit too rustic."

"It was you who wanted her, Professor."

"*Mea culpa,*" said he.

Tuda stayed on with the Professor while she looked round for another job. She found one, as a washer-up in a milkbar in the same quarter. Sometimes she comes to see us in the porter's lodge. The affair of the books is never mentioned. But she tells me she is learning to read and write.

THE TERROR OF ROME

I HAD such a longing for a new pair of shoes that often I used to dream about them during that summer, as I lay in the basement room where the porter of the

building hired me out a camp-bed for a hundred lire a night. Not that I was really going barefoot; but the shoes I was wearing had been given me by the Americans, and they were light, flimsy shoes, and by this time they hardly had any heels left, and one of them was broken through at the little toe and the other had stretched so much that it kept on coming off and looked like an old slipper. I managed to stave off hunger, more or less, by selling a few things in the black market, by carrying parcels and doing commissions; but I never succeeded in putting aside the money for the shoes, for which some thousands of lire were still needed. These shoes had become an obsession with me, a black speck hanging in space which pursued me wherever I went. It seemed to me that I could not continue to live without some new shoes, and sometimes, so depressed was I at being shoeless that I went so far as to think of killing myself. As I walked along the street I looked at nothing but the feet of the passers-by; or else I would stop in front of the windows of the shoemakers' shops and stand staring in wide-eyed wonder at the boots and shoes, comparing their prices, shapes and colours and choosing, in my mind, the pair that would suit me best. In the basement room where I slept I had made the acquaintance of a certain Lorusso, who was an outcast like myself—a chap with fair, curly hair, thick-set but not so tall as I am; and I realized that I envied him simply because he, by some means or other, had managed to procure himself a really fine pair of lace-up boots, of thick leather with hobnails and double soles, of the kind that the Allied officers wore. These boots were too big for Lorusso, and indeed, every morning, he used to stuff them with newspapers to keep them on his feet. On the other hand they fitted *me* like a glove, since I was taller than he was. Now I knew that Lorusso, too, had a great longing: he wanted to buy himself a shepherd's pipe, an instrument which he was able to play because, before coming to Rome, he had been with the shepherds up in the mountains. He said that, with his small size and fair hair and blue eyes, with his windjacket on and his Allied soldier's trousers tucked into his Allied soldier's boots, and his pipe between his lips, he felt he might be able to go round the restaurants and earn a lot of money playing the shepherd's tunes he

knew, and a few others as well, which he had learned when he was acting as messenger-boy for the Americans. But the pipe would cost a lot of money, just as much as a pair of shoes or even more; and Lorusso, who, like me, plied all sorts of trades, never had the money to buy it. He thought a great deal about his pipe, as I did about my shoes; and, without saying anything, we had reached an agreement: first I talked to him about the shoes and then he talked to me about the pipe. But it was all nothing but words and we never managed to procure ourselves either pipe or shoes.

At last we came, by mutual agreement, to a decision; or rather, it was I who thought of it and Lorusso at once approved it as though he had never thought of anything else in all his life. We would go to some lonely spot frequented by lovers—the Borghese Gardens, for instance—and there we would carry out an attack upon one of those loving couples who seek secluded spots for undisturbed hugging and kissing. I discovered then, to my surprise, that Lorusso was a blood-thirsty young man—a thing I would never have believed from his innocent shepherd-boy appearance. He began saying, immediately, with enthusiasm, that he felt like "bumping off" our victims, both woman and man; and he kept repeating that expression "bumping off"—which he had picked up goodness knows where—with the greatest gusto, as though he could already see the moment when he would bump them off in earnest. At one point, indeed, as if to show me how he would conduct himself, he actually threw himself upon me and seized me by the collar, pretending to rain blows upon my head with a heavy iron spanner that he possessed. "I'll give it him like that . . . and that . . . and that . . . until I've bumped them off, both of them." Now I myself have very bad nerves, because I lay for a night and a day in a cellar beneath the ruins of my home in my native village, after an air raid, and ever since then I have had a tic which causes my face to twitch constantly, and the slightest thing makes me lose control of myself. So I gave Lorusso a violent push which sent him sprawling against the basement wall, and I said: "Keep your hands to yourself. . . . If you touch me again, I swear I'll take that spanner and bump you off once and for all." Then I recovered myself and went on: "You

see what an ignorant fool you are? . . . You don't understand anything, you're as dumb as an ox. . . . Don't you know that couples who make love out of doors do it because they don't want anyone to know? Otherwise they'd do it at home. . . . And so, if you take their money, they won't report you because they're afraid that a husband or a mother will get to know they've been making love. . . . But if you bump them off, the newspapers will start talking about it, everyone will get to know, and in the end the police will catch you. . . . No; the thing to do is to pretend to be a couple of plain-clothes policemen: 'Hands up, you're kissing in a public place; don't you know that's forbidden? You're breaking the law. . . .' And, with the excuse that they're breaking the law, we take their money and off we go." Lorusso, who is extremely stupid, gazed at me open-mouthed, his round, china-blue eyes staring out under the hair that grows half-way down his forehead. At last he said: "Yes, but . . . but dead men tell no tales." He said it quite without expression, just as when he said "I'll bump him off", like a parrot; goodness knows where he had heard the saying. "Don't be a fool," I replied. "Do what I tell you and keep your mouth shut." He made no further protests, and we came to an agreement about our plan.

On the day fixed, we went off in the evening to the Borghese Gardens. Lorusso had the spanner inside his wind-jacket, and I had a German pistol in my pocket which I had been given to sell, but I had not yet found anybody who wanted it. As a precaution I had unloaded it, thinking that either our attack would be immediately successful or, if I found it necessary to shoot, it would be just as well to give it up altogether. We started off down the avenue that runs beside the riding track, and here every seat had its couple, only there were lamp-posts and people passing, just as in the streets. We turned out of this avenue into the one which leads to the Pincio, one of the darkest places in the Borghese Gardens; loving couples like it also because it is convenient to the Piazza del Popolo. Here it was really dark, owing to the trees and the scarcity of lamp-posts; and the couples on the seats were beyond counting. There were even two couples on one seat, sometimes, each carrying on regardless of the

other, kissing and hugging, quite unashamed at being seen by the other two who were doing the same thing. Lorusso seemed now to have forgotten his desire to bump people off, for he was made like that and changed his mind very easily; now, seeing all these couples kissing, he began to sigh, his eyes shining and his face filled with envy. "After all, I'm young too," he said, "and when I see all these lovers kissing, I tell you straight, if I wasn't in Rome but in the country, I should frighten the man so much that he'd run off, and then I'd say to the girl: 'Come on, my beauty . . . come along, my beauty, I won't do you any harm. . . . Now come along, my dear, come with your little Tommaso.' " He walked down the middle of the avenue, at some distance from me, turning to look at the couples in a most shameful way and licking his lips with his big red tongue, just like an ox; and he wanted to make me look at the couples too, and notice how the men put their hands under the women's dresses and how the women clung to the men and allowed them to put their hands on them. "What an idiot you are," I answered. "Do you or do you *not* want that pipe?" He twisted round to look at one of the seats and replied: "What I want now is a girl. . . . Any girl would do, that one for instance." "In that case," I said, "you oughtn't to have brought your spanner and come with me." "I almost think I'd have done better not to," he answered. He talked like that because he was frivolous and changed his mind every minute. As we walked round the Pincio he had had a few glimpses of bare feminine leg, he had seen a few kisses and squeezings, and this had sufficed to make him feel that he was dying with longing to make love to someone. I myself, on the other hand, am not easily distracted, and when I want a thing, it has to be that thing and nothing else. Well, I wanted the shoes and I had made up my mind to get them that same evening, at all costs.

We wandered about the Pincio for some time, from one avenue to another, from seat to seat, past all the white marble busts set out in a long row in the shadow of the trees. We could never find exactly the right place because we were always afraid that other couples near by would see us; and Lorusso, as usual, was again becoming inattentive. It was no longer love that he was

thinking of now but, for some reason, the marble busts. "Who are all these statues?" he suddenly demanded; "I should like to know who they are." "You see how ignorant you are," I answered. "They're all great men. . . . Since they're great men, statues have been made of them and they've been put here." He went up to one of the statues, looked at it and said: "But this is a woman." "You can see she was great, too," I replied. He did not appear convinced, and finally asked: "Well then, if I was a great man, they'd make a statue of me?" "Of course they would . . . but you—you won't ever become a great man." "How d'you know? . . . Suppose I became the Terror of Rome. . . . If I bumped off lots of people, and the newspapers talked about me, and they never found me—then they would make a statue of me too." I started to laugh, even though I didn't want to, because I knew where he had got this idea of becoming the Terror of Rome: we had been, some days before, to see a film which was called, in point of fact, "The Terror of Chicago". "No," I answered, "you don't become a great man by bumping people off. . . . How ignorant you are. . . . The great men are the ones who didn't bump anybody off." "What did they do, then?" "Oh well, they wrote books." He looked uncomfortable at these words, because he was almost illiterate; but at last he said: "All the same, I should like to have a statue. . . . It's quite true, I *should* like it. . . . In that way, people would remember me." "You're an absolute idiot," I told him, "and I'm ashamed of you. . . . But it's no use my trying to explain, it would just be a waste of time."

Well, we wandered round a little longer and then went on to the terrace of the Pincio. There were a few cars there and the people had got out of them and were admiring the panorama of Rome. We too went forward to the edge of the terrace: from there you could see the whole of Rome, looking like a huge black, burnt tart, with numbers of cracks of light in it, and each crack was a street. There was no moon but the sky was clear, and I pointed out to Lorusso the silhouette of the dome of St. Peter's, black against the starry sky. "Just think," he said, "if I was the Terror of Rome . . . all those people, in all those houses, would be thinking of me and worrying about me all the time, and I"—at this point he made

a gesture with his hand as though he wanted to threaten the whole of Rome—"every night I should go out and bump somebody off and no one would find me." "You're a perfect fool," I answered, "and you oughtn't ever to go to the pictures. . . . In America they have tommy-guns and cars and they're organized, they're people who take the job seriously. . . . But who are you? Just a shepherd brought up on butter-milk curd, with a spanner inside your wind-jacket." After some moments of offended silence he said, at last: "It's a fine view, there's no denying it, very fine indeed. . . . But I quite understand, this evening we do nothing; we just go home to bed." "What d'you mean?" I asked him. "I mean that you've cooled off and that you're afraid." He always behaved like that: his mind became distracted, he thought about other things, and then he put the blame on me and accused me of being a coward. "Come on, you fool," I answered; "I'll show you whether I'm afraid or not."

We started off down a very dark avenue leading right along the parapet that overlooks the Muro Torto road. There were benches and plenty of couples here too, but I realized that, for one reason or another, there was nothing to be done here and motioned to Lorusso to keep on. At one point we saw a couple of lovers in a really dark and lonely spot and I almost made up my mind, but at that moment two mounted policemen went past and the lovers, fearing to be seen, disappeared. And so, following the parapet all the time, we reached that part of the Pincio that overlooks the Muro Torto bridge. There is a pavilion there, surrounded by a laurel hedge reinforced with barbed wire. At one side, however, there is a little wooden gate which is always open. I knew this pavilion from having slept there on various nights when I had not had the money even to pay for the porter's camp-bed. It is a kind of greenhouse, with panes of glass on the side looking towards the bridge, and inside it they keep gardening tools and flower-pots and also a number of marble busts that have had their noses or heads broken by small boys, with a view to their being repaired. We went over to the parapet, and Lorusso sat down on it and lit a cigarette. He sat there, balancing himself and smoking with an impudent air; and there came over me, at that moment, so strong a dislike of him that I thought

seriously of giving him a push and knocking him over the edge. He would have fallen about a hundred and fifty feet and would have been smashed like an egg on the pavement of the Muro Torto road, and then I should have run down and taken those lovely boots that I was so envious of. At this thought I was furious, because I realized that for a moment I had deceived myself into feeling so violent a dislike for Lorusso that I could have killed him; whereas, on the contrary, the real reason behind it was still those accursed boots, and it was all the same to me whether it was Lorusso or someone else, provided I got the boots. But perhaps I might really have pushed him over, for I was tired of wandering round and he was getting altogether too much on my nerves, if it had not been that fortunately, all of a sudden, two black shadows passed close beside us, almost touching us—two interlaced shadows, a pair of lovers. They passed right in front of me; the man was shorter than the woman, but owing to the darkness I could not see their faces. At the gate, the woman appeared to be resisting, and I heard the man murmur: "Let's go in here." "But it's dark," she replied. "What does that matter?" he said. Anyhow, in the end she gave in, and they opened the gate, went in, and disappeared into the enclosure.

Then I turned towards Lorusso and said: "That's just what we want. . . . They're gone into the greenhouse so as to be quiet. . . . What we now do is to present ourselves as plain-clothes policemen; we pretend we've caught them breaking the law and we take away their money." Lorusso threw away his cigarette, jumped down from the parapet and said to me: "All right; but *I* want the girl." I was flabbergasted, and asked: "What d'you say?" He repeated: "*I* want the girl . . . don't you understand? Anyhow, that's what *I* intend to do." Then I understood, and I said: "But what d'you mean, are you crazy? . . . Plain-clothes policemen can't do that kind of thing." "Whatever does that matter to me?" he said. He spoke in a curious, strangled sort of voice, and although I could not see his face I knew from his tone that he was serious. I answered resolutely: "In that case we won't do anything." "Why not?" "Because I say no. . . . I won't allow women to be treated like that." "And supposing I want to?" "In that case I'll hit you, I swear I will." There

we were, standing close to the parapet, our noses almost touching as we quarrelled. He said: "You're a coward." And I replied, drily: "And you're a fool." And then, in a fury because I was preventing him from giving vent to his desire for a woman, he said, all of a sudden: "All right then, I won't touch the girl . . . but as for the man, I'll bump him off." "But *why*? *why*, you damned fool?" "It's got to be that—either the girl or the man." Meanwhile time was passing and I was chafing because an opportunity like that might never occur again, so in the end I said: "All right . . . if it's necessary. . . . But it's to be understood that you bump him off only if I make a movement like this"—and I passed my hand across my forehead. Goodness knows why—perhaps because he was utterly stupid—Lorusso immediately accepted this and answered that he agreed. I made him repeat the promise that he would not move unless I gave the signal, and then we pushed open the gate and followed the others into the enclosure. On one side, against the parapet, stood the little tramcar which, in the daytime, drawn by a small donkey, takes children for rides along the avenues of the Pincio. In the corner, between the parapet and the gate, was a lamp-post which threw its light across the enclosure and through the panes of glass right into the greenhouse. Inside the greenhouse you could see rows and rows of flower-pots tidily arranged according to size and, behind the flower-pots, several of those marble busts standing on the floor, looking very odd in their whiteness and stillness, like people appearing out of the ground from the chest upwards. For one moment I could not see the lovers; then I espied them at the far end of the greenhouse, away from the light. They were in a dark corner, but the girl was standing partly in the ray of light from the lamp-post, and I could see who it was from the white hand that she allowed to trail inertly, while they were kissing, against the dark background of her dress. I pushed open the door and said: "Who's there? What are you doing here?" The man came forward at once, in a decisive manner, while the woman remained in the corner, hoping, perhaps, not to be seen. He was a short young man, with a big head and hardly any neck, and his face was puffy, with prominent eyes and protruding lips. He was full of assurance, as I saw immediately, and

not at all attractive. Automatically I lowered my eyes to his feet and looked at his shoes and saw that they were new ones, of just the kind I like, American in style, with crêpe rubber soles and moccasin-type stitching. He did not appear at all frightened, and this irritated me so that my face twitched more violently than ever. "And you," he enquired, "who are *you*?"

"Police," I replied. "Don't you know that kissing in public places is forbidden? You're breaking the law. . . . And you, Signorina, please come forward. It's no use your trying to hide."

She obeyed and came and stood beside her friend. She was, as I have said, slightly taller than he, slim, with a tight bodice and a black bell-shaped skirt that came halfway down to her ankles. She was pretty, with a Madonna-like face and long black hair and large black eyes, and she looked a very serious sort of girl, with no make-up on her face, so much so that, if I had not seen them kissing, I should never have thought her capable of it. "Don't you know, Signorina, that kissing in public places is forbidden?" I said to her, in order to give some impressiveness to my part as a policeman. "Besides, for a respectable young lady like you, it's disgraceful. . . . Kissing in the dark, in the public gardens, like any common prostitute. . . ."

She was about to protest, but he stopped her with a gesture; and then, turning to me, he said insolently: "Well, I'm breaking the law, am I? Show me your papers then."

"What papers?"

"Identity papers to show you're really policemen."

It flashed across my mind that he himself belonged to the police: it wouldn't have surprised me, in view of my usual bad luck. But I said to him roughly: "Not so much talk. . . . You're breaking the law and you've got to pay up."

"Pay up, indeed!" He spoke briskly, like a lawyer; and you could see that he was not frightened. "Policemen, indeed! Policemen, with faces like that! And he with that wind-jacket and you with those shoes! . . . Really, d'you take me for a fool?"

At this reminder of my shoes—which in truth, worn and misshapen as they were, could hardly have belonged

to a policeman—I was seized with a kind of fury. I pulled out the revolver from the pocket of my waterproof and thrust it hard against his stomach, saying: "All right then, we're not policemen. . . . But you hand over that money just the same and don't make any fuss about it."

Lorusso, so far, had stood beside me without saying a word, staring open-mouthed, like the stupid fool he was. But when he saw that I had dropped my play-acting, he woke up. "D'you understand?" he said, flourishing the spanner under the man's nose. "Hand over your money unless you want me to crack you over the head with this." His interference irritated me even more than the arrogant bearing of the man. The girl, when she saw the heavy iron instrument, gave a little scream; but I said to her politely—for I know how to be polite when I want to: "Signorina, don't pay any attention to him . . . he's a fool. . . . Don't worry, no one will do you any harm. . . . Go back into that corner over there and leave us to get on with it. . . . And you, put away that spanner." Then I said to the man: "Come on, hurry up."

It must be admitted that the young man, however unattractive, was nevertheless courageous; even now, when I was holding the pistol rammed into his stomach, he showed no fear. He simply put his hand into his breast pocket and took out his wallet: "Here's my wallet," he said. I squeezed it as I put it into my own pocket and could tell from the feel of it that there was not much money in it. "Now give me your watch," I went on. He slipped the watch off his wrist and handed it to me: "Here's my watch." It was a watch of little value, with a steel case. "Now give me your pen." He took the pen from his waistcoat pocket: "Here's my pen." It was a good pen: an American one, streamlined, with the nib enclosed in the holder. Now there was nothing more I could ask him for. Nothing, that is to say, except those beautiful new shoes which had struck me from the first moment. He said, ironically: "Anything else you want?" And I, without hesitating, replied: "Yes, take off your shoes."

This time he protested: "My shoes—no." And then I could resist no longer. For some time now—from the very beginning, in fact—I had been conscious of a temptation to slap that flat, unattractive face; and I wanted to

see what the effect of this would be, on myself as well as on him. So I said: "Take off your shoes, come on . . . don't play the fool"; and with my free hand I hit him, rather crookedly. He turned very red and then white, and I could see the moment coming when he would fly at me. But, fortunately, the girl cried to him from her corner: "Yes, Gino, give them everything they want"; and he, staring at me, bit his lip till it bled and then said: "All right then," bending his head as he spoke. Then he stooped down and started undoing his shoes. He took them off one after the other and, before handing them to me, considered them for a moment with an air of regret: he liked them too. Without his shoes he was really very short, even shorter than Lorusso; and I saw why he had bought himself a pair of shoes with such thick soles. It was then that the mistake occurred. Standing there in his socks, he asked me: "What d'you want now? My shirt too? . . ." and I, holding his shoes in my hand, was just on the point of replying that that was enough, when something touched me lightly on the forehead.

It was a small spider which had come down on the end of its thread from the ceiling of the greenhouse; and I saw it almost at once. I put up my hand to my forehead as if to brush it away; and Lorusso, like the stupid brute he was, thinking that I had given the signal, at once raised the spanner and dealt the man a violent blow on the back of the head. I heard the hard, dull sound of the blow, as though he had struck against a brick. Immediately the man fell forward against me, embracing me almost, like a drunkard; and then he slithered to the ground, his face upturned and his eyes rolled back so that you could see only the whites. The girl uttered a shrill scream and, rushing from her corner, bent over him, calling him by name as he lay motionless on the floor. To show how idiotic Lorusso was, I need say no more than that, in the midst of the confusion, he again raised the spanner and held it above the head of the kneeling girl, looking enquiringly at me to know whether he should play the same joke on her as he had played on her friend. "Are you mad?" I shouted at him. "Come on, let's get out." And so we ran off.

As soon as we were back in the avenue, I said to Lorusso: "Now, go slowly, just as if you were out for a

stroll. . . . You've committed enough follies for one day." He slackened his pace, and I, as I walked along, thrust the shoes one into each pocket of my waterproof.

I said to Lorusso as we went: "I hardly need to tell you what an idiot you are. . . . Why in the world did you take it into your head to hit him like that?" He looked at me and answered: "You gave me the signal." "What signal d'you mean? . . . It was a spider that touched me on the forehead." "How could I know that? You gave me the signal." At that moment I was so angry with him that I could have strangled him. I said furiously: "You're an absolute idiot. . . . You've probably killed him." Then he began to protest, as though I had slandered him. "No," he said; "I hit with the back of the spanner, where there's no point. . . . If I'd wanted to kill him, I'd have hit him with the point." I said nothing, but I was boiling with rage and my face was twitching so badly that I put my hand up to my cheek to keep it still. "You saw what a pretty girl she was," he went on; "I was almost saying to her, 'Come, my beauty, come along, my dear.' . . . Quite possible that she might have been pleased. . . . I was wrong not to try. . . ." He went strutting along in a self-satisfied way, and kept on telling me what he would have liked to do to the girl and how he would have done it; until at last I said to him: "I say, shut that beastly mouth of yours and keep quiet. . . . Otherwise I won't guarantee . . ." He stopped talking and we went in silence through the Piazzale Flaminio, along the river, past the bridge, and came to the Piazza della Libertà. There are seats there under the shadow of the trees, and there was no one about, and a slight mist was coming up from the Tiber. "Let's sit down here a moment," I said, "and we can see how much we've made. . . . And then I want to try on the shoes."

We sat down on a seat and, to begin with, I opened the wallet and found that it contained only two thousand lire, which we divided equally. Then I said to Lorusso: "You don't really deserve anything . . . but being a just man I'll give you the wallet and the watch. . . . I'll keep the shoes and the fountain pen. . . . Is that all right?" He immediately protested: "It's certainly *not* all right. . . . That's a funny sort of way to behave. . . . Where's my half share?" I answered him angrily: "But

you made a stupid mistake, and it's right that you should pay for it." Well, we argued for some time and in the end it was agreed that I should keep the shoes and that he would have the wallet, the pen and the watch.

I said to him, however: "What will you do with the pen? You don't even know how to write your own name." "If you really want to know," he replied, "I *can* read and write; I went to the elementary school. . . . Besides, I can always sell a pen like this in the Piazza Colonna." I had given in because I was longing for the moment when I could throw away my old shoes, and besides, I was tired of quarrelling and my nervousness had even given me a stomach-ache. And so I took off my shoes and tried on the new ones. But I discovered, to my disappointment, that they were too small; and, as is well known, there is a remedy for everything in the world except shoes that are too small. So I said to Lorusso: "Look, these shoes are too small for me, but they're just the right size for you. . . . Let's exchange. You give me your boots which are too big for you, and I'll give you these, which are better and newer than yours." This time he gave a long whistle, as it were contemptuously, and answered: "You poor fool . . . I may be an idiot, as you say, but I'm not quite such an idiot as that." "What d'you mean?" "I mean that it's time to go to bed." He looked pompously at the young man's wristwatch and added: "*My* watch says half past eleven. . . . What about yours?" I said nothing, but I put back the shoes in the pockets of my waterproof and followed him.

We took the tram, and the whole time I was chafing at the injustice of my lot, and thinking what a hopeless idiot Lorusso was, and wondering what I ought to do to make him give me his boots in exchange for my shoes. As we got out of the tram, in our own quarter, I reopened the discussion, and, seeing that reason served no purpose, even went so far as to implore him. "Lorusso, those boots are a matter of life and death to me. . . . I can't go on living without any. . . . If you won't do this to please me, at least do it for the love of God." We were in a deserted street, over in the direction of San Giovanni. He stopped under a street-lamp and began twisting his foot this way and that, in a conceited fashion, in order to make me angry. "Lovely boots, mine,

aren't they? . . . They make you envious, don't they? . . . But it's no good your losing your temper over it; I'm not going to give them to you." Then he started humming: "No, no, no, you haven't got 'em yet and you can't have 'em now." He just sneered at me, in fact. I bit my lips and I swear that, if there had been any bullets in my revolver, I would have killed him, not merely because of the boots but because I could not endure him any longer. In this way we arrived at the basement where we slept. We knocked at the window; the porter, grumbling as usual, came and opened the door, and we went downstairs to our dormitory. Here there were five camp-beds in a row; in the first three slept the porter and his two sons, young men of our own age, and in the farthest two, Lorusso and myself. The porter made us pay in advance, then he turned out the light and went to his bed, while we searched for ours in the darkness and lay down. But, once I was settled under my thin blanket, I began thinking about the boots again, and finally I came to a decision. Lorusso slept in his clothes, but I knew that he took off his boots and placed them on the floor, between the two camp-beds. In the darkness I would get up, I would put on his boots, leaving him my shoes, and then I would go out, pretending I was going to the lavatory, which was outside at the entrance to the basement. I thought it would be a good plan for me to do this in any case, because there was the chance that Lorusso had really killed the man in the greenhouse and it was therefore better not to remain in his company. Lorusso did not know my surname, he only knew my Christian name, and so, if he were arrested, he would not be able to say who I was. No sooner said than done. I raised myself up, put my feet to the floor, stooped down very slowly and slipped my feet into Lorusso's boots. I was starting to lace them up when I was conscious of being dealt a violent blow: luckily I moved, and the blow, just touching my ear, took me on the shoulder. It was Lorusso who, in the dark, had hit out at me with his accursed spanner. The pain of it made me lose my head, and I jumped up and lunged at him blindly. He seized hold of me by the chest, trying to hit me again with the spanner, and we rolled to the floor together. The clatter we made awoke the porter and his two sons, and they switched on the light. I was crying

"Murderer!" and Lorusso was yelling "Thief!"; and the others started shouting too, and trying to separate us. Then Lorusso tried his spanner on the porter; and the porter, a bad-tempered man whom any trifle sufficed to infuriate, seized a chair and tried to hit Lorusso over the head with it. Lorusso took up a position at the far end of the room, his back to the wall, and, waving the spanner, started shouting, "Come on, if you dare! I'll bump you off, the whole lot of you. . . . I'm the Terror of Rome!" He was like a madman, red in the face, his eyes starting out of his head. I was so beside myself with rage, at that moment, that I had the imprudence to shout: "Look out! He just killed a man, only a few minutes ago. . . . He's a murderer!" To cut a long story short: while we were trying to hold Lorusso still and he was yelling and struggling like a lunatic, one of the porter's sons went off and called the police; and, partly from me, partly from Lorusso, they found out what had happened in the greenhouse and arrested us both.

They took us to the police station, and all they had to do was to make one telephone call; they then immediately accused us of being the two men who had carried out the attack in the Borghese Gardens. I said it had been Lorusso, and he, this time—perhaps because of the way he had been knocked about—did not breathe a word. "You're a fine pair," said the police magistrate, "really a fine pair. . . . Robbery with violence and attempted murder." But, to show you how irresponsible Lorusso was, all I need tell you is that, after a moment or two, he roused himself and asked: "What day is it tomorrow?" He was told it would be Friday. And then, rubbing his hands together, "Ah," he said, "that's good, tomorrow it's bean soup at the Regina Coeli prison." And so it was that I got to know he had already done time, whereas he had always sworn to me that he had never been in prison. Later I looked down at my feet and saw that I was still wearing Lorusso's boots; so I reflected that, after all, I had got what I wanted.

FRIENDSHIP

MARIAROSA is a double name, and the woman who bore that name was double too, both in her physical and her moral nature. She had a great red and white face, as big as a full moon, out of all proportion to her body, which was normal; she made you think of those roses that are called cabbage-roses because they are as big and solid as cabbages; and in truth, the moment you saw her, you could not help thinking that two faces could easily be made out of a face like hers. This big face, moreover, was always placid and smiling and seraphic —quite the opposite of her character, which, as I discovered to my cost, was positively devilish. That was why I said she was double in her moral nature as well.

I had courted her in all possible ways. At first I had been respectful, gallant, insinuating; then, seeing that she paid no attention to me, I had tried being rather more forward, more aggressive, waylaying her half-way up the stairs, on the darkest landing, and trying to kiss her by force: all I got was a few violent shoves and, in the end, a slap in the face. Then I decided to assume an air of disdain, to look offended, to cut her dead, turning away when I met her: but this was worse, for it was as though I had never existed. Finally, I began imploring and beseeching her, begging her, with tears in my eyes, to love me: no response. If only she had discouraged me completely, once and for all! But, wickedly, just when I was on the point of sending her to perdition, she would capture me all over again by some remark, or look, or gesture. I learned that, to a woman, admirers are like necklaces or bracelets—ornaments that she prefers not to be without if she can help it. And then, at a look or a gesture of that kind, I would think: "Surely there's something behind it . . . let's try again." Suddenly I learned that this coquette had become engaged to my best friend, Attilio. This made me furious, for many reasons: first because she had done it under my very nose, with-

out telling me anything about it; and also because it was I who had introduced Attilio to her; without knowing it, I had played gooseberry to the pair of them.

But I am a loyal friend, and friendship, for me, comes before everything. I had been in love with Mariarosa; but, from the moment she got engaged to Attilio, for me she became sacred. She would have liked—and there is no doubt about it—to go on provoking me; but I made things clear to her in every possible way, and in the end I said to her one day, frankly: "You're a woman and you don't understand friendship. . . . But from the moment you started going with Attilio, it's been, for me, just as if you weren't there. . . . I don't see you and I don't hear you . . . d'you understand?"

At the time, she appeared to admit that I was right. But since she afterwards went on flirting with me, I decided not to see her any more, and I kept my word. I heard later that they were married and had gone to live with her sister, who worked as a nurse. And that Attilio, who generally, nine days out of ten, was unemployed, had found a job as a porter with a firm of carriers. Mariarosa, as before, was doing ironing, but only by the day. This information was, in one sense, a balm to my mind. I now knew, in fact, that they were not very prosperous and that the marriage could not be going very well. But, as a good and loyal friend, I continued to give no sign of my existence. A friend is a friend, and friendship is a sacred thing.

I am a plumber, and, as everyone knows, plumbers go round from one house to another, and sometimes, on their rounds, find themselves in places where they would not wish to be. One day, on my way to a customer, with my bag of tools over my shoulder and a double coil of lead piping round my arm, as I was going along the Via Ripetta I heard my name called: "Ernesto!" I turned round; and it was she. When I saw her, with her big, solid, placid, sly face and her small body with its wasp waist and rounded hips and bosom, my old feeling came back to me and I was left almost breathless. But I said to myself: "You're a friend . . . you must behave like a friend." To her I said, drily: "So we meet again."

On her arm she was carrying her shopping bag, full of

vegetables and parcels done up in yellow paper. Smiling, she said: "Don't you recognize me?"

"Of course I do. Didn't I say, so we meet again?"

"I wish you'd come back home with me," she went on. "Just this very morning I discovered that the waste-pipe of the kitchen sink is stopped up. . . . Do come back with me, won't you?"

I answered, conscientiously: "All right, if it's to do a repair. . . ." She threw me one of those glances which in the old days had made my head turn dizzy, and added: "But you must carry my shopping bag for me." And so there I was, laden like a donkey, with my bag of tools, the lead piping and the shopping bag, following her as she walked in front of me.

We had not very far to go, to a street that crossed the Via Ripetta, where we went into a house by a little door that looked like the entrance to a cave, and climbed up a sordid staircase, damp and dark and smelly. Half-way up, she turned to me and said with a smile: "D'you remember how you used to lie in wait on the landing, in the dark? How you frightened me! . . . Or have you forgotten already?" Stiffly I answered: "Mariarosa, I don't remember anything. . . . I only remember that I'm a friend of Attilio's and that friendship comes before everything." Disconcerted, she replied: "Well, who's saying you're not to go on being his friend?"

We went into the flat: three little rooms under the roof, with windows on to a courtyard that looked like a well, so black and sunless was it. In the kitchen there was no room to turn round, and the glass door opened on to a little balcony where the lavatory was. Mariarosa sat down on a chair, legs apart, her lap full of beans to be shelled; and I, putting my tool-bag on the floor, knelt down beside the sink to carry out the repairs. I saw at once that the pipe was rotten and a new one would have to be put in; so I warned her: "You see, a new pipe will have to be put in. . . . Are you prepared to pay for that?"

"How about your friendship?"

"Oh well, all right," I said with a sigh, "I'll put it in for nothing. . . . But you'll have to give me a kiss in exchange."

"And how about your friendship?"

I bit my lip, thinking: "Friendship that cuts both

ways"; but I did not say anything. I took my pincers, unscrewed the fitting, which was just as rotten as the pipe, removed the pipe, took the soldering lamp from my bag and poured some petrol into it, still in silence. At this point I heard her asking me: "Are you really a friend of Attilio's?"

I turned and looked at her: she was sitting there with eyes lowered, smiling, sweet as honey, intent on her beans. "Of course I am," I said.

"Well, then," she went on quietly, "with you I can speak freely. . . . I really should like you, who know him so well, to tell me whether you think certain impressions that I have are correct."

I told her to go on; in the meantime I had lit the lamp and was regulating the flame. "For instance," she resumed, "don't you think that the job he's found is hardly the right thing for him? Working as a carrier. . . ."

"You mean a porter. . . ."

"Working as a carrier is not a profession at all. . . . I'm trying to make him train to become a male nurse . . . my sister could help to get him into the Policlinico. . . ."

In the meantime I had inserted the pipe. I took the soldering lamp and, almost without thinking, as I dangled it in my hand, I asked: "D'you want the truth or d'you want me to be polite?"

"I want the truth."

"Well, I'm a friend of Attilio's, but that doesn't prevent me from seeing his failings. . . . In the first place, he's lazy."

"Lazy?"

I took a piece of tin, put the lamp to it and began the soldering. The flame made a roaring sound, and I raised my voice to be heard above the noise. "Yes, lazy," I said. "You, my dear girl, will have to get accustomed to having an idle husband. . . . I'm a hard worker, myself, but he is not; he likes to get up late, potter about, go to the café, read the paper and discuss the sporting news. . . . All right for a porter, I daresay—but as a male nurse, which is a responsible job . . . no, I don't see him as a male nurse."

"But I'm not even sure," she went on, still in that calm, thoughtful tone of voice, "I'm not even sure that he's got this job. . . . He talks about going to work—but I

haven't seen any money yet. . . . I'm beginning to think he may have told me some sort of a lie. . . . What d'you think?"

"A lie?" I said without reflection. "But he's the biggest liar I know. . . . He'd make you see things that aren't there at all. . . . As for lies, you can be quite sure . . ."

"That's just what I thought. . . . But, if he doesn't go to work, what can he be doing? I don't believe he really does nothing except potter about and go to the café. . . . There must be something or other. . . . He always goes off in such a hurry, he's always so preoccupied." She broke off to take a saucepan from the shelf in which to put the beans she had already shelled. I looked at her over my shoulder—smiling, quiet, serene. After a moment she went on: "You know what I think? That there's a woman in it. . . . You who know him, can you tell me if that's true?"

A voice inside me gave warning: "Now be careful, Ernesto, go slowly. . . . There's a trap. . . ." But, whether it was that bitterness was stronger than prudence, or that, hearing her speak ill of her husband in this way, I began to have fresh hopes for myself, I could not help answering: "I think you're right. . . . Women, for him, are everything, whether pretty or ugly, young or old. . . . Didn't you know?"

The soldering was finished. I put out the lamp and levelled down the still soft metal with my finger. Then I began tightening the nut with my spanner. Meanwhile she was saying, calmly: "Yes, I knew something, but nothing exact. . . . Now, I've just had an idea—perhaps he's having an affair with Emilia, that girl with red hair —d'you know her?—who used to work with me at the laundry. . . . What d'you think?"

I rose to my feet. Mariarosa, who had put the beans into the saucepan, also got up, shaking her dress to get rid of the shells. Then she went over to the sink, held the pan under the tap and ran some water into it. I went up behind her and placed my two hands round that wonderfully slim waist of hers, saying: "Yes, it's quite true, he sees Emilia every day, in the late afternoon; he waits for her outside the laundry and goes home with her. Now you know the whole story: what did you expect?"

She turned her face slightly, with a smile, and an-

swered: "Ernesto, didn't you say you were a friend of his? Leave me alone!"

My only answer was to try and take her in my arms. But she disengaged herself and said in a hard voice: "Now you've done the repairs, you'd better go away." I bit my lip and replied: "You're right . . . but you make me lose my head. . . . I have to remember all the time that I'm a friend of Attilio's and that you're his wife." I felt mortified as I said this, so I collected my tools and was about to say good-bye to her and go away. At that moment the kitchen door opened and Attilio appeared.

He was pleased to see me and greeted me in a friendly way: "Well, hullo, Ernesto!" I answered: "Mariarosa asked me to mend the pipe, and I've done that; in fact I've put in a new pipe." "Thank you," he said, coming over to me; "thank you very much. . . ." At that same moment Mariarosa's voice, quiet but forced, made us both turn round. "Attilio," she began.

She was standing beside the kitchen stove, a smile on her face, her hand resting on the top of the stove. She went on, all in one breath, without raising her voice: "Attilio, Ernesto says you're lazy and that you don't like work. . . ."

"You said that?"

"And, as I myself thought, he also says you're a terrible liar, and that it's quite possible you haven't really got this porter's job. . . ."

"You said that?"

"And then he has confirmed what I already knew—that you see Emilia every day and are having an affair with her. . . . While I'm a mere drudge and go toiling round from one house to another doing ironing, you're amusing yourself with Emilia—and then you tell *me* that you go to work. . . . It's no good your trying to deny it now; Ernesto, who's your friend and who knows you, has given me full confirmation of everything. . . ." She spoke in a perfectly calm voice, and I realized, for the first time, that I had let myself be drawn into confidences with a madwoman. And indeed, she had no sooner finished speaking—while he, with an ugly look on his face, came close up to me and kept on saying: "You said that?"—than she took up a heavy flat-iron which was standing on the stove and hurled it at his head. This she

did with such accuracy of aim that, if he had not ducked his head, she would have killed him. What happened then, I find it hard to describe. Stiffly, quietly, crazily she went on taking things from the stove—heavy, dangerous objects such as knives, rolling-pins, pots and pans—and flinging them at him; he, after attempting two or three times to protect himself, slipped through the door and ran off. I made my escape too, leaving my two or three yards of lead piping on the floor, and rushed off down the stairs, with him yelling at me: "Don't you ever show your face here again. . . . If I ever see you again, I'll kill you." I didn't feel safe until I had crossed the bridge and found myself back in the gardens of the Piazza della Libertà. There I sat down on a seat to regain my breath. And then I reflected that it had been friendship which had made me speak, precisely because I knew that Attilio's character really was like that and I was vexed by it; and I swore to myself that, from that day onwards, I would never again be friends with anybody.

THE RUIN OF HUMANITY

ABOUT the middle of February the north wind, which had made me feel so wretched during the winter, dropped, the sky filled with clouds, and a moist breeze, which seemed to be coming from the sea, started to blow. At the soft breath of this breeze I felt myself coming to life again, although in a melancholy sort of way, as if it were whispering in my ear: "Come along, cheer up, while there's life there's hope." But, just because I felt that winter was over and spring beginning, I knew that I could no longer bear to go and work in my uncle's workshop. I had gone into the workshop a year before, like a train going into a tunnel, and I had not come out yet and I could not even see daylight at the other end. Not that the work was unpleasant or repugnant to me personally: there are worse jobs. The workshop consisted of a large shed, situated at the far end of an enclosed piece of

ground which served as a depôt for a brick factory, halfway along the Via della Magliana. Inside the shed the air was always full of white, flour-like sawdust, as in a mill; and in the midst of this cloud of dust, and of the continuous humming of saws and electric lathes, we workers and my uncle, looking like floury millers, moved about, busy from morning till night making furniture and fittings. My uncle, poor man, loved me like a son, the workmen were all good chaps and, as I have already said, the work was not repugnant: first a tree-trunk, of oak or maple or chestnut, long, twisted, leaning up against the wall of the workshop, with all its bark upon it and even, still remaining under the bark, the ants that had inhabited it when it was a tree; then, after the saw had dealt with it, so many clean, white planks; then, out of these planks, with the lathe or the plane or other tools, as occasion demanded, table-legs, parts of wardrobes, cornices; and finally, after the piece of furniture had been nailed and screwed and glued together, the painting and polishing. For anyone who takes pleasure in his work, this gradual progress from a tree-trunk to a piece of furniture may become a passion; it is always interesting, or, at the least, it is never boring. But evidently I am made in a different way to other people: after a few months, I could not bear the work any longer. It was not that I am not a good worker, but that I like, every little while, to pause in my work and look round me—just so as to see who I am and where I am and what point I've reached. My uncle, on the other hand, was exactly the opposite: he was always working, fiercely, passionately, never stopping to take breath or reflect; and thus, from a chair to a bracket, from a bracket to a wardrobe, from a wardrobe to a night-table, from a night-table to a chair, he had turned fifty—for that was his age—and you could see that he would go on in the same way until his death, which would be rather like the death of a lathe that falls to pieces or a saw that loses its teeth, the death, in fact, of a tool and not of a man. And on Sundays, indeed, when he put on his best suit and walked very slowly along the pavements of the Via Arenula in company with his wife and children, his eyes half closed, his mouth twisted, and two deep lines between his mouth and his eyes, he really looked like a discarded, useless,

broken tool; and I could not help remembering that he had acquired that appearance by stooping over his lathe and his saw and screwing up his eyes in a perpetual cloud of sawdust; and I said to myself that life was not worth living unless you paused now and then and reflected that you *were* alive.

The bus that starts from the Trastevere station goes out into the country and back. Peasants, labourers and all sorts of poor people bring mud into it on their boots, and the smell of sweat from their working clothes, and perhaps a few insects as well. And so, at the starting-point, they spray some kind of stinking disinfectant on the floor and even on the seats, which catches you in the throat and, like an onion, makes you weep. On one of those soft February mornings, while I was waiting—my eyes full of tears because of the disinfectant—for the bus to start, the wind from the sea, coming in through the windows, gave me a great longing to go off on my own account, to pause for a little and reflect about myself. And so, when I got off the bus near the workshop, instead of going to the right, towards the shed, I went to the left, towards the meadows that lie between the main road and the Tiber. I walked off over the pallid grass, in the gentle, moist wind, facing a sky full of white clouds. The Tiber itself I could not see, because at that point it runs through a dip in the ground; away beyond it I could see abandoned factories, a big building with arches looking like a great dovecot, and a church with a dome and pillars that support nothing and look like the wooden pillars in a child's building game. Behind me was the industrial district of Rome—tall chimneys with long plumes of black smoke, factory sheds full of big windows, the low, broad cylinders of two or three gasometers and the high, narrow ones of silos. When I thought of the workmen toiling in those factories, my leisure seemed to me even more agreeable. I felt full of cunning and watchfulness, as though I were going out hunting. And hunting indeed I was—not for game, however, but for myself.

When I reached the river, at a point where the bank is not so very steep, I slithered down the slope to the edge and sat down amongst the bushes. Only one step from my feet ran the Tiber, and I could see it twisting through the countryside like a snake, the dazzling light

from the cloudy sky reflected in its yellow, wrinkled surface. On the other side of the river were more pale green meadows and, scattered over them, sheep nibbling at the grass, sheep with puffed-out, dirty wool, and here and there a perfectly white lamb, whose wool had not yet had time to go grey. I sat clasping my knees and stared at the yellow water, which at this point formed a little whirlpool from which a black branch projected, shaggy and untidy and looking like the hair of a drowned woman. And then, in the silence, with the branch, black as ebony, quivering from the force of the current but not moving, I felt all at once as though inspired; and, not with thought but with a feeling more profound than thought, I seemed to have understood something of great importance. Or rather, to be able to understand it, if only I did my utmost to grasp it. This thing, in fact, was poised delicately; it was like having, as they say, a word on the tip of one's tongue. And, in order to hold on to it and prevent its falling back into the darkness, I said, suddenly, aloud: "My name is Gerardo Mucchietto."

Immediately a mocking voice from above said: "Commonly called Mucchio. . . . Well, well, are you talking to yourself?"

I turned round and right above me saw, standing on the edge of the bank, the daughter of the custodian of the brick-yard, Gioconda, in a black velvet skirt and a pink sweater, stockingless, her hair fluttering in the wind. Now, of all the people I knew in the whole world, Gioconda was the one I would least have wished to see at that moment. She had taken a fancy to me and she persecuted me, although I had made it plain to her in every possible way that I did not care for her. I had an immediate impulse to say something unpleasant to her, so that she should go away and leave me alone to return to the thing I had been on the point of grasping when she arrived. Without moving, I said to her: "Take care, you're showing too much leg."

But brazenly she slid down beside me. "D'you mind if I keep you company?" she asked.

"I don't know what to do with your company," I said, still without looking at her; "and besides, how can you sit on the ground here, in all this dust?"

But she lifted up her dress and sat down, well satisfied,

saying: "I haven't much on underneath, anyhow." The thing I wanted to think about was still there, luckily, perched on the edge of my mind, like a bird on a window-sill. Gioconda, in the meantime, all sweet and sugary, was clinging on to my arm and saying: "Gerardo, why are you so faithless? . . . I *am* so fond of you."

"I'm not faithless, it's just that I don't like you, that's all."

"Why don't you like me?"

I said hastily, fearing that, as I spoke, the thing I wanted to think about might vanish: "I don't like you because you've got a big red face covered with pimples. . . . You look like a cabbage rose. . . ."

What would most women have done after a remark like that? Gone away at once. She, on the contrary, pressed herself close up against me and said coyly: "Gerardo dear, why can't you be nicer to me?"

"All right, I will be," I said desperately, "provided you go away."

"Why, were you expecting some other woman, Gerardo dear?"

"No, no one; I wanted to be alone."

"Why alone? No, let's stay together. . . . It's so lovely to be together."

This time I said nothing: the thing was still there, on the edge of my mind, but I felt that any trifle would be enough to drive it back into the darkness out of which it had come. It was at this moment that Gioconda exclaimed: "Would you like me to guess what you're thinking about?"

Stung to the quick, I answered: "You won't guess if you try for a hundred years."

"But I tell you I *can* guess. . . . Now, let's see if I'm right. I say you were thinking about these socks I'm wearing rolled down to the ankle, that match my sweater. . . . Be truthful, that's what you were thinking about." As she spoke she held out her leg, which was big and red and covered with fair hairs, displaying her foot in its strawberry-coloured sock. I could not help raising my eyes and looking at her foot, and then, all of a sudden, I became aware that the thing had fallen back over the edge, down into the darkness. I no longer felt anything, I no longer understood anything, I was empty, dead,

inert, like the stakes of seasoned wood that my uncle kept propped up against the workshop wall. At the thought that I had lost sight of that most beautiful and important thing through the chatter of this stupid girl, I was seized suddenly with an immense rage and I cried out, turning brusquely towards her: "Why did you come here? . . . You're my evil genius. . . . Couldn't you have left me alone?" And, since she continued to squeeze my arm, I tore myself away from her and hit her on the head. But she clung to me obstinately, although I beat her on her big blonde head: so then I jumped up, seized her by the hair and threw her down on the gravel and trampled on her with my feet, all over her body and even on her head. Rolled up into a ball with her face in her hands, she groaned and let forth a shriek or two, but made no attempt at resistance: possibly she was pleased. However, when I was tired of trampling on her, she got up and, all covered with dust, went off sobbing. I shouted loudly after her: "You women are the ruin of humanity." Still sobbing, she went off down a track along the gravelly bed of the Tiber and disappeared.

But the thing, by this time, had taken flight, and now, although I was alone, I felt just as inert and dull and empty as when Gioconda had been there. There was nothing to be done, for that day anyhow; and there was no knowing how long it would be before I could find another opportunity like this. Seething with rage and at the same time both undecided and full of eagerness, I roamed the fields the whole morning, cursing Gioconda and cursing my fate, unable to be still, either in mind or body. In the end I realized there was nothing for me to do except go back to the workshop, so back I went. Amongst the piles of bricks Gioconda, carrying a cooking-pot, was scattering food to the hens; she greeted me from afar with a smile. I did not respond and went on into the workshop. "Better late than never," cried my uncle when he saw me. I said nothing, but put on my overalls and resumed my work at the exact point where I had left it the day before.

SILLY OLD FOOL

IF you are in the habit of flirting with women, it is difficult to realize when the time for that is past and women begin to look upon you as a father or—even worse—a grandfather. It is especially difficult because every middle-aged man has, inside his head, another head: his outer head has wrinkles, grey hair, decayed teeth, lustreless eyes; his inner head, on the other hand, has remained just the same as when he was young, with thick black hair, a smooth face, white teeth and bright eyes. It is the inner head that looks longingly at women, imagining itself to be visible to them. But of course women see the outer head, and say: "What does he want, the old scarecrow? Can't he see he's old enough to be my grandfather?"

Well, that year the saloon where I've worked as a barber for nearly thirty years was enlarged: the mirrors and washbasins were changed, the walls and cupboards were repainted, and finally the proprietor thought it a good thing to take on a manicurist in addition; her name was Iole. Apart from the proprietor there were three of us in the shop: a young man of about twenty-five called Amato, who was dark and serious and had been a policeman; Giuseppe, five years older than me, short, fat and bald; and I myself. As always happens when a woman is introduced into surroundings where there are only men, all three of us, as I very soon noticed, kept looking insistently at Iole. She, I may say, was what is meant by an ordinary, picture-postcard type—handsome, showy, with good features and black hair; there are millions like her. Now it must be observed at this point that I, without wishing to boast, can claim to be a handsome man. I am thin, of just the right height, with a pale, strong face; and women say that I have an interesting expression. And certainly my eyes are striking, especially if I look sideways; they are soft and full of feeling, but with just a touch of scepticism in them. But the best thing about me

is my hair, which is light chestnut brown, fine and clean and wavy, and cut *alla nazzarena,* that is to say, standing up like a mass of flames, and with long side-whiskers reaching half-way down my cheeks. Moreover, I am always smart: away from the shop I am always dressed correctly, with tie and socks and handkerchief all to match; and, at the shop, in an overall of such whiteness as to be more what you would expect of a surgeon than a barber. It is not surprising, with these characteristics, that I should be successful with women. And, since this success on my part has been invariable, I have got into the habit, if a woman attracts me, of looking at her in an insistent, suggestive sort of way which is worth a hundred compliments. So that when I approach her, after having looked at her long and intently, I find that the fruit is already ripe: all I have to do is to put out my hand and pluck it.

At the shop, the person of whom I was most afraid, as regards Iole, was Amato. He was not good-looking, he was not interesting, but he was young. As for Giuseppe, I did not consider him to be of any account: he was older than me, as I said, and really quite hopelessly ugly. Iole sat all the time at her little manicurist's table in the corner, stupefied with boredom and immobility, absorbed in reading and re-reading the two or three newspapers to be found in the shop, or in doing her own nails while she waited to do those of her customers. By instinct, and almost against my will, I kept looking at her continually. A customer would come in and sit down in the chair: I would take a towel, spread it out with a single, elegant gesture, and at the same time contrive to throw her a lingering glance. Or I would be washing someone's hair, massaging his soapy head with my two hands; and once more, a lingering glance. Or again, I would be shading off the edge of a customer's hair with the point of the scissors: four snips of the scissors, and then another glance. Or if she moved, in her indolent way, to go and fetch some instrument from a cupboard, I would follow her with my eyes in the mirror. Iole, I must admit, was far from sprightly or coy: on the contrary she had a numbed, reserved, obtuse expression, like a big sleepy cat. But gradually, after some time, first she realized that I was looking at her; then she accepted the fact of being

looked at; and finally she began to look at me in return. Without any hint of archness, it is true, for she had none; and in an awkward, heavy, but quite unmistakable way.

I thought then that the fruit, as they say, was ripe; and one Saturday I invited her to go bathing at Ostia on the Sunday afternoon. She accepted at once, remarking, however, that I must not be critical of her on account of her bathing-costume: she had got fatter and the only one she had was rather tight for her. She said, in fact, without a shadow of coyness: "I've become a little plump through sitting still all the time at the shop." It was the remark of a girl who was entirely devoid of slyness; and I liked her for it. We arranged to meet next day at the San Paolo station; and I made a careful toilet before starting. I shaved and put some talcum powder on my cheeks; I combed my hair with a fine comb to remove even the slightest suspicion of dandruff; I sprinkled a little violet essence on my head and on my handkerchief. I was wearing a shirt with an open collar, a light tropical jacket and white trousers. Iole was extremely punctual: at two o'clock I saw her coming towards me through the crowd of excursionists; she was all dressed in white, and she looked rather short and rather bulky, but young and attractive all the same. "What a crowd!" she said, as she greeted me; "I'm afraid we shall have to stand all the way." Now I am chivalrous by nature and I answered her that I would find her a seat: she must just leave it to me. Meanwhile the train had come into the station, and the crowd on the platform had a movement of panic, as if they were being charged by a squadron of cavalry; everyone shouted and people called to each other; and I hurled myself forward, clung on to a door, raised myself above the crowd, and was on the point of getting into the train. Then a dark young man gave me a push and tried to get past me. I gave him a good push in return and got in front of him; he pulled me by the sleeve but I jabbed him in the stomach with my elbow, freed myself and threw myself into a compartment. But I had lost time with that young cad and the compartment was already full, except for one seat. I rushed to it, and he rushed too; and almost at the same moment I put down my bathing-costume, and he his jacket, in order to keep it. Then we faced each other. "I got here first," I said. "Who says

you did?" "I do," I replied, flinging his jacket back in his face. At that moment Iole arrived and sat down without any hesitation, saying: "Thank you, Luigi." The young man picked up his jacket, hesitated, and then, seeing that he could not turn Iole out, went off, proclaiming in a loud voice: "Silly old fool."

The train started almost at once and, hanging on to a rail, I remained standing close to Iole. But I had lost all enthusiasm now, and I should have liked to get out again and go home. Those words, "Silly old fool", had caught me just at the moment when I least expected it. I reflected that there had been two different feelings at the back of the young man's words. The insult lay in the "silly fool"; and there was no harm in that: he had meant to annoy me, he had called me a fool. But the word "old" had not been uttered with the object of insulting me. He had said "old" as a self-evident truth. Just as—supposing I had been sixteen instead of fifty—he would have said: "What an idiot of a boy!" For him, in fact, as for everyone else, including Iole, I was an old man; and it didn't make much difference that he should think me a fool whereas Iole thought me intelligent. Perhaps it might not even have been necessary for Iole to take the seat. In the end the young man might have given it up to me just the same, out of respect for my age. And this was confirmed by a man sitting opposite Iole, who had witnessed the scene and who now said: "What a rude young man. . . . He ought to have given it up out of respect for your age, if for no other reason."

I felt all chilled and bewildered. And every now and then I put my hand up to my face as though I were trying to verify how old I was with my fingers, in the absence of a looking-glass. Iole, of course, was not aware of anything. Half-way to Ostia she said to me: "I'm sorry you have to stand." I could not help replying: "I'm an old man, I know, but not so old that I can't stand for half an hour or so." I was half hoping she would answer: "Luigi! . . . You—old? . . . Whatever do you mean?" Instead of which the dull creature made no answer at all; and so I was convinced that I had spoken the truth.

At Ostia she undressed first and came out of the bathing-hut in a costume that was tight almost to bursting; her

body was white and fresh and firm, so youthful that it made one positively angry. I in turn went into the hut, and the first thing I did was to go and look at myself in the little bit of broken mirror hanging on the wall. I was old indeed: how in the world had I failed to become aware of it? In one glance I saw eyes that were dim and lost in wrinkles, hair full of white threads, skin that was flabby on the cheeks, yellow teeth. My open-necked shirt, so very youthful, made me ashamed: it left my whole neck exposed, with sagging folds of skin over the windpipe. I undressed; and as I stooped down to slip on my bathing-trunks my paunch rose up and then fell back again, like a deflated bag. "Silly old fool," I repeated to myself furiously. Such, I reflected, were the surprises of life. One hour ago I had believed myself young enough to play the gallant with Iole; now, thanks to those three words, I saw that I was old enough to be her father. And I felt ashamed of having eyed her so much in the shop and of having then invited her out: what on earth did she think of me, I wondered; what did I look like to her?

I knew later what she thought. We stood clinging to the safety rope and let the waves break over us, for the sea was rough; and after each wave I was left breathless, and I said to myself: "I get out of breath like this because I'm old." But she, happy as could be, cried to me: "Why, Luigi, you know I never thought you were such a sport." "Why?" I asked; "what sort of person did you think I was?" "Well," she answered, "men of your age don't generally like going into the sea. . . . It's the young men . . ." At that moment a big, foaming wave broke over us: I fell on top of Iole and, to steady myself, seized her by the arm—a firm, round arm, its flesh youthful and elastic. I shouted at her, my mouth still full of salt water: "I'm old enough to be your father." She laughed as she stood in the midst of the boiling foam. "Not my father," she said; "let's say—my uncle." Well, by the time we had finished our bathe, what with embarrassment and shame, I was quite unable to speak. I felt as if I had a trap in my mouth which had sprung and closed itself; and that it would take a lever to open it again. Iole walked in front of me, pulling at her bathing-costume to cover her thighs and her bosom, for, in getting wet, it had become positively indecent; then she threw herself down

on the beach, rolling in the sand; and so firm was her flesh that the sand did not stick to her but fell off again, in damp pieces. I sat down beside her, dumb, paralysed, incapable of either movement or speech. It is possible that Iole, in spite of being more insensitive than a rhinoceros, became conscious of my distress; for, all at once, she asked me if I was not feeling well. "I was thinking about you," I said. "Which of us, at the shop, do you like best—Amato, Giuseppe, or me?" Conscientiously, after a long pause for reflection, she answered: "Why, I like you all three." But I persisted: "Amato is young, of course." "Yes," she replied, "he's young." "I believe he's in love with you," I went on after a moment. "Really?" she answered; "I hadn't noticed it." She seemed absent-minded, as though she were worried about something. Finally she said: "Luigi, I'm in trouble: my costume's come unstitched down the seam at the back. . . . Give me the towel; I must go and get dressed." To tell the truth, I was pleased at this disaster. I handed her the towel, and she wrapped it round her hips and ran off to the hut. Half an hour later we were in the train, in an empty compartment. I had fastened up the open collar of my shirt, and I was reflecting that everything was over now, as far as I was concerned, and that I was an old man.

That day I swore I would never look at Iole again nor at any other woman; and I kept my word. It seemed to me that she was a little surprised, and that sometimes she stared at me with an air of reproof, but this may have been just an impression. A month passed, during which I spoke to her perhaps four or five times. Meanwhile she had made friends particularly with Giuseppe, who, however, behaved towards her just like a father, in a good-natured, serious way and without the slightest sign of flirtatiousness. I felt older than ever; I went on cutting hair and shaving chins and accepting tips, and I did not breathe a word. But one day at closing-time, as I was taking off my overall in the little store-room behind the shop, the proprietor, a kind-hearted man, announced: "Now, if you're not engaged this evening, let's have dinner together . . . I invite you all. . . . Iole and Giuseppe have got engaged." I looked into the shop: Iole was smiling in her corner, at her manicure table; Giuseppe

was smiling on the other side, as he cleaned a razor. All at once I felt an enormous relief: Giuseppe was older than me, Giuseppe was ugly, and yet Iole had preferred Giuseppe to Amato. I rushed towards Giuseppe with arms outstretched, crying: "Congratulations, my warmest congratulations"; then I embraced Iole and kissed her on both cheeks. Of the three people in the shop, in fact, it was I who was the happiest.

The next day was a Sunday; and in the afternoon I went out for a walk. And I realized, as I went along, that I was beginning to look at women again, as I had in the past; and to look at them singly, one by one, both from the front and from the back.

A PAIR OF SPECTACLES

NESPOLA the dressmaker was so called (*nespola* means a medlar) because she was a dwarf with a yellow and black face—exactly like a medlar when it is ripe; her eyes, the half-circles under her eyes, her eyebrows and her little moustaches were all black, and her cheeks and forehead and nose were yellow. Nespola dressed always like one of those rag dolls that you see children dragging face downwards along the ground, her clothes wrapped tightly round her, with a short skirt that showed her big, swollen legs. Nespola worked at home, on the second floor, in the Via dell'Arancio. There she had three rooms—a bedroom with a big double bed, and, so closely jammed all round it that you could hardly move, a chest-of-drawers with a marble top, a wardrobe with a looking-glass in it, two bedside tables and a larger table and chairs; a little fitting-room with nothing in it except a triple cheval-glass; and finally the small bedroom in which her son Natale slept, which gave on to a little balcony overlooking the courtyard, between the box-like lavatory and the tiny kitchen. Nespola worked in the bedroom, sitting in a child's wicker armchair in the window-recess. Anyone coming into the room could not see

her, for she sat inside the recess, between the curtain and the window; and the curtain, which was all embroidered with birds and baskets of flowers, was drawn. Inside the recess, apart from her little armchair, Nespola had her work-table and a canary in a cage. Then, when she was designing or cutting out, she would spread the material on the bed, climb up on to the coverlet, and there, on her knees, move round the dress as she worked. Fittings, as I said, she carried out in the tiny room next door. The customer would undress and stand in front of the cheval-glass, and Nespola, a needle or a pin in her mouth, would climb up on a stool and so contrive to reach the right level. While she was fitting the dress, Nespola never stopped talking, very fast, in a confidential, earnest tone. For the most part she paid compliments to her customer, more or less in an undertone, extolling the whiteness of her skin, the beauty of her hair, the colour of her eyes, the lines of her figure. And, if the customer was specially charming, Nespola would even go so far as to call her son to witness: "Natale, come here, take a look and tell me if this isn't the Madonna come down to earth." The customers, who were mostly humble girls of the neighbourhood, did not protest; especially as Natale was not a man to inspire awe. These compliments, in any case quite sincere, had helped Nespola to acquire a good clientele. Many girls who lived in the same building, or in those near by, came to her.

I know about all these things because I was a frequent visitor at Nespola's house during the time when Natale and I were friends. Natale was then looking for a job, and he did indeed find one at the vulcanizing shop where I worked as a mechanic. But, by the end of two months, he said that was not the road to success, and he abandoned the workshop and went home again. His remark about success made an impression upon me because I never *had* thought that vulcanization would bring any kind of success except a bare living; and so—and also because of other things he had said to me which had pricked my curiosity—I continued to see him, although, to tell the truth, I did not find him particularly likeable. Physically, Natale was large and thickset, with a puffy, colourless, pallid, cold-looking face, a face which, for some reason, made me think of a fish with cheeks. But,

as he wore round, thick spectacles and had a serious, set expression, they called him "the Professor", though I believe he had risen no higher than an elementary school. That face of his, and his sedate manners, inspired confidence; and indeed the jobs he had had before he came to the vulcanizing shop had always been not so much workmen's as clerks' jobs—messenger, caretaker, warehouseman, copyist. They were all jobs, in fact, based upon the confidence awakened by a face that looked like a full moon with spectacles. But here the devil comes into it: for Natale had lost all these jobs because, so it appeared, he had at some point or other committed some extremely serious error, such as pilfering or cheating or stealing. Things always took the same course, as far as I could make out: at first his employer trusted him, swore to his honesty, would have given him the keys of the safe; and then—no one quite knew how it happened—all of a sudden he gave him the sack, with, sure as fate, the same remark: "Go away and don't ever let me see you again. . . . And thank that sainted mother of yours that we're not reporting you to the police." These things I knew and yet didn't know, for, even if one visited their house, nothing ever leaked out. Nespola was always brisk and busy, and an occasional sigh was as much as she ever allowed herself in the way of a complaint: and as for him, if they had spat in his face it wouldn't have troubled him. In short, they kept up appearances; and yet, when they were alone, one cannot but imagine that she wept and despaired and he promised to turn over a new leaf. But as soon as he found a new job, he reverted to his old ways.

Natale, to look at, did not appear very strong: he was of middle height, fleshy and overfed-looking, and his clothes seemed always too tight for him. But actually he was as strong as a bull; at the workshop I had seen him lift a small motor-car all by himself. This unsuspected strength was, in a way, a symbol of his real character, which again was concealed beneath his appearance of gravity and composure. He was, in fact, what is called a humbug: outwardly one thing, inwardly another. It was only his mother who—by this time—knew what he really was: her eyes had been opened by what Natale had done at Naples some years before. At that time, when the war

was still going on in the North, Natale, who had not yet broken loose and who, with his contrite face and his spectacles, still led his mother by the nose, persuaded her and some of her women friends to entrust him with a sum of money so that he might go to Naples and buy up a quantity of women's shoes: there was a shortage of these in Rome, and they would sell them at an increased price, and it was an opportunity for them to become rich, the whole lot of them. For some reason or other the rumour had spread through the building that Natale had a natural aptitude for business, and all these poor women gave him something; his mother gave him the whole of her savings. Natale went to Naples by car, but he did not bring back the shoes, in fact he came back without his jacket. He related that, when he had got as far as Formia, he had been attacked by bandits. It was a pity, however, that, a short time afterwards, the driver of the car in which he had gone to Naples came out with the truth. In Naples Natale had fallen in with some Neapolitans who were furious gamblers; they had all sat down to play together, and he had lost. I was told that all this had made Nespola ill, especially, as she said, on account of all the friends who had trusted her. She was determined to repay them, and she struggled to do this over many years. Natale, on the other hand, was quite untroubled, just as though nothing at all had happened. But I believe his mother never trusted him again.

Natale, then, was a gambler; not out of a passion for gaming but because, as he said, he had become aware early in life that a poor devil cannot get very far by honest work and that luck is the only thing that can raise him above a poor man's condition. Further, he had his own ideas about life and about a success in life, and he willingly expounded them; and, as I have already said, even after he left the vulcanizing shop I went on seeing him because his ideas aroused my curiosity and because this thief who looked like a professor, this youth who looked like a middle-aged man, this ignoramus who never stopped holding forth like a man of learning, partly enraged and partly enthralled me. Natale used to say that in life everything depends on luck, and luck comes to the man who catches hold of it; that luck, moreover, requires to be helped; that everything depends on readi-

ness and quickness, on snatching the right moment and then striking your blow. It was a pity, however, that, in his frenzy to strike this blow, he disregarded all subtlety and went into it wholesale. Natale used to say all these things as if they were gospel truth, staring fixedly through his glasses as he spoke, and with an assurance that was quite astonishing; just as though he had not been the wretched creature he was, but a man who had, as he said, been able to seize fortune by the hair and never let go. He enraged me; and on one occasion, unable to resist the temptation, I interrupted him and asked: "But you . . . what about you?" He was not in the least put out, for he had a face of the best-quality brass; he shrugged his shoulders and said: "What's that got to do with it? . . . Rome wasn't built in a day."

In the meantime, while he was waiting for Rome to be built, he continued his pursuit of fortune, playing cards wherever he happened to be and with anybody. He played mostly in a milk-bar not far from his home, at night after closing-time, in the room behind the shop, while the barman, having lowered the roller-blind, sprinkled sawdust on the floor and cleaned the counter. He played with the owner of the milk-bar, the waiter and another man. Did he win? Or did he lose? It may be that he won sometimes, for otherwise I do not see how he could have come by the money to go on gambling; but in the end he lost, because he, a poor man, son of a dressmaker, was like an earthenware pot against iron pots, the other three all having more money than he had. Then, when he lost, not knowing what to do to stop up the gaps, he betrayed the trust of anyone who gave him a job. He pilfered things and sold them. Here lay the whole mystery of those sudden dismissals, with their parting words which would have made a Negro blush but which affected him in no way whatsoever. His mother, who by this time knew him thoroughly, did not, like so many mothers, say to him: "Don't go running after women" or "Don't waste time with sport"; on the contrary she said, simply: "Do leave those cards alone, my sunbeam."

She called him her golden boy and her sunbeam because, when all was said and done, and although she knew him to be dishonest and a thief into the bargain, he was still her son and she hoped that one fine day he

would mend his ways, would start out along the right road and become a steady worker. That was what she hoped; but the golden boy, the sunbeam, one morning when Nespola had gone out to deliver a dress, took an iron bar, forced the lock of the wardrobe, and grabbed all the money he could find. I believe he afterwards explained to his mother that he meant to play one game of cards, just one single game, and then give her back the money multiplied a hundred times. But unfortunately, as usual, he lost. As far as the money was concerned, I think Nespola resigned herself to its loss, so accustomed was she to such disasters. But the iron bar—it was just as though he had driven the iron bar into her heart. From that day onwards she became melancholy, and, when she climbed up on the stool to fit her customers' dresses, she even gave up paying them compliments.

One day Natale came home towards evening and told his mother that he had been going round looking for a job. He was without his glasses and he explained that he had left them in a café where he had taken them off in order to read the newspaper. He always took off his glasses and put them aside when he had to do anything that required particular care—either for fear of breaking them or because, at close range, he saw better without them. His mother had got his supper ready, as usual, and placed it on the little work-table in the window recess in the bedroom; and he devoured a plate of vermicelli with anchovies, a plate of fried beetroot and a long roll of bread. He was, in fact, very hungry; and Nespola later declared that she had never seen him eat with such a good appetite. After his supper, Natale lit a cigarette and afterwards slept for about an hour on the big double bed. When he woke up he asked Nespola for some money and went off to the cinema near by, where an American comic film was being shown. I myself was in the cinema, and I saw him in the front row, without his glasses, laughing from time to time, his whole body shaking as he sat huddled in his seat, as if he were coughing.

Well, to cut a long story short, when he came out of the cinema the police, who had already been to his home, arrested him and carried him off bodily to the police-station. Next morning all the papers published the news. Natale had gone to pay the rent and had taken the

opportunity to kill the gouty old landlord by hitting him over the head with a hammer. If he had not been such a precise person, perhaps they would never have found him out. But, in order to wield his hammer more efficiently, he had first taken off his glasses and placed them on the window-sill; then, in the excitement of the moment, he had forgotten them and they had been found by the police. His mother, poor woman, who thought that by now there could be no more surprises in store for her, was faced that morning with the biggest surprise of all. I do not know how she took it during the first days, when all the papers were talking about her son and about her; but later, it is to be believed that she entreated the protection of the Madonna—for she was a religious woman; and that the Madonna gave her grace and courage to carry on with her life. It is certain that, after some time had elapsed since the crime, Nespola went to see her son in prison, where, thanks to his serious manner and his good conduct, he had been given a position of trust in the office of the prison hospital.

MARIO

THIS was how it happened. I got up very early in the morning, while Filomena was still asleep, took my bag of tools, crept quietly out of the house and went to Monte Parioli, to the Via Gramsci, where there was a leaking boiler which I had to attend to. How much time did it take me to carry out the repair? A couple of hours, certainly, because I had to take out and put back the pipe. Having finished the job, I went back by bus and tram to the Via dei Coronari, where I have my home and my shop. Now, take note of the time: two hours at Monte Parioli, half an hour to get there, half an hour to come back—three hours altogether. What are three hours? Either much or little, say I, according to circumstances. I had taken three hours to repair a piece of lead pipe; someone else, on the other hand . . .

But let us take things in their proper order. At the turning into the Via dei Coronari, as I was walking quickly along under the wall, I heard myself called by name. I turned round, and there was Fede, the old lodging-house keeper who lives in the house opposite to us. This Fede, poor old thing, has both legs so swollen with gout that they look like the legs of an elephant. She was all out of breath as she said to me: "What a sirocco, today! . . . Are you going up the street? Will you give me a hand with my shopping-basket?"

I replied that I would willingly do so. I transferred my tool-bag to the other shoulder and took her basket. She started walking beside me, dragging her two pillar-like legs along under her long loose coat. After a little, she asked: "And where in Filomena?"

"At home," I answered. "Where else should she be?"

"Yes, I see, at home," she said with her head bent; "of course."

"Why of course?" I asked, just in order to say something.

"Of course . . . Ah, my poor boy," she said.

I began to be suspicious. I allowed a moment to pass, and then I demanded: "And why 'my poor boy'?"

"Because I'm sorry for you," said the ugly old creature without looking at me.

"What d'you mean?"

"I mean that times are not what they were. . . . Women today are not as they used to be in my time."

"Why?"

"In my time a man could leave his wife at home with a quiet mind. . . . As he left her, so he found her again. . . . But nowadays . . ."

"Nowadays what?"

"Nowadays it's not like that. . . . Well, well . . . Give me my basket: thank you very much."

All the joy of that beautiful morning had now turned to poison inside me. Pulling away the basket, I said: "I shan't give it to you unless you explain. . . . How does Filomena come into all this?"

"I don't know anything about it," she said. "But forewarned is forearmed."

"But tell me," I cried; "what has Filomena done?"

"Ask Adalgisa," she replied; and this time she caught

hold of the basket and made off with an agility I didn't know she was capable of, almost running, in her long loose coat.

I decided there was no use in going back to the shop at the moment, so I turned round and went off to look for Adalgisa. She also, luckily, lived in the Via dei Coronari. Adalgisa and I had been engaged to be married before I met Filomena. She had remained a spinster, and I suspected that it was she who had invented this story about Filomena. I climbed up four floors, banged hard on the door with my fist, and all but hit her in the face because she opened it so quickly. Her sleeves were rolled up, and she was holding a broom. She said very sharply: "Gino, what d'you want?"

Adalgisa is a rather small girl, attractive, but with a head that's a little too large and a chin that's a little too prominent. Because of her chin, they call her the Queen of Spades. You mustn't, of course, say it to her face. But I was so irritated with her that I said: "Is it you, Queen of Spades, who's been putting it about that Filomena does things at home that she shouldn't do, while I'm in the shop?"

She fixed two angry eyes upon me. "It was Filomena you wanted . . . and now you've got her."

I went in and seized hold of her by the arm. But I let go at once, because she looked at me almost hopefully. "Then it *was* you?" I said.

"It wasn't me. . . . I only repeated what I heard."

"And who did you hear it from?"

"Giannina."

I said nothing and turned to go out. But she held me back and added, looking at me provocatively: "And don't go calling me Queen of Spades."

"Why, haven't you got a chin like a spade?" I replied, freeing myself and rushing off down the stairs.

"Better a chin like a spade than a pair of horns," she shouted after me, leaning over the banisters.

I was beginning to feel bad now. It did not seem to me possible that Filomena could be deceiving me, seeing that during the three years we had been married she had lavished every kind of affection upon me. But what a thing jealousy is! These very signs of affection now seemed to me, in the light of Fede's and Adalgisa's remarks, to be a

proof of treachery. Well, well . . . Giannina was the cashier in a bar close by, in the same street. She is a languid blonde, with smooth hair and china-blue eyes; calm, slow, thoughtful. I went over to the cash-desk and whispered to her: "Tell me, was it you who invented the story that Filomena entertains people at home, when I'm not there?"

She was attending to a customer. She pressed the keys of the cash-register, pulled out the ticket, announced, without raising her voice: "Two coffees . . ."; and then asked me quietly: "What were you saying to me, Gino?"

I repeated my question. She gave the customer his change and then answered: "Really, Gino, do you think I should invent a thing like that about Filomena . . . my best friend?"

"Then Adalgisa must have dreamt it."

"No," she corrected me, "no . . . she didn't dream it . . . I didn't invent it; but I repeated it."

"What a kind friend!" I could not help exclaiming.

"But I also said I didn't believe it. . . . Of course Adalgisa didn't tell you *that.*"

"Well then, who told *you?*"

"Vincenzina. . . . She came along from the laundry specially to tell me."

I rushed out without saying good-bye and went straight off to the laundry. Looking in from the street I was at once able to see Vincenzina as she stood at the table, pressing with her two arms on the iron as she worked. Vincenzina is a tiny little girl with a squashed-looking face like a cat's, very dark and lively. I knew she had a weakness for me, and indeed, when I beckoned to her with my finger, she immediately left the iron and came outside. She said hopefully: "Gino, how lovely to see you!"

"Now, you hussy," I answered, "is it true that you're going round saying Filomena entertains men at home while I'm at the shop?"

Swaying from side to side with her hands in her apron pockets, she replied, somewhat disappointed: "Would you mind if she did?"

"Answer me," I insisted; "is it you who invented this vile story?"

"Huh, how jealous you are!" she said, shrugging her

shoulders. "Goodness me, I suppose a woman isn't allowed to have a little chat with a friend . . . ?"

"So it *was* you . . ."

"Truly, I'm sorry for you," said this mischievous girl suddenly; "why d'you think I should bother about your wife? I haven't invented anything. . . . It was Agnese who told me; she even knows his name."

"What's he called, then?"

"You'd better get *her* to tell you."

I was sure, by this time, that Filomena was deceiving me. Even the man's name was known. My involuntary thought was: "It's just as well I haven't got any heavy tools in my bag, or I might lose my head and kill her." I could not bring myself to believe it: Filomena, my wife, with another man. . . . I went into the tobacconist's shop where Agnese sold cigarettes for her father. "A couple of *nazionali*," I said, throwing down the money on the counter.

Agnese is a young girl of seventeen, with a forest of crisp, dry hair standing straight up on her head. Her face is puffy, pale, colourless, and covered with pink powder, and her eyes are as black as a couple of laurel-berries. I knew her, as indeed did everybody else in the Via dei Coronari. And as everybody knew, so did I also know that she was mercenary, capable of selling her soul for money. As she handed me the cigarettes I bent over and asked her: "Tell me, what's his name?"

"Whose name?" she replied in astonishment.

"My wife's boy friend."

She looked at me as if she were terrified: I must have had an ugly expression on my face. "I don't know anything about it," she said hurriedly.

I tried to smile. "Come on, tell me," I said. "Everyone knows it by now; I'm the only one who doesn't know it."

She stared at me, shaking her head; so then I went on: "Look, if you tell me, I'll give you this." And out of my pocket I took the thousand-lire note which had been given me for the repairs I had done that morning.

At sight of the money she became excited, almost as if I had spoken to her of love. Her lip trembled, she looked all round and then placed her hand on the note, saying in a low voice: "Mario."

"And how did you come to know about it?"

"From the doorkeeper of the house where you live."

So it really was true. It was like playing "colder and warmer"; we were now already inside my own building. Soon we should be inside my own flat. I left the tobacconist's and hurried homewards; it was only a few doors farther on. All the time I kept repeating "Mario"; and as I said the name all the Marios I knew filed past in front of my eyes: Mario the milkman, Mario the cabinet-maker, Mario the greengrocer, Mario who had been a soldier and was now unemployed, Mario the son of the pork-butcher, Mario, Mario, Mario . . . In Rome there must be a million Marios and there must be a hundred of them in the Via dei Coronari. I went in at the entrance-door of the house in which I lived and made straight for the doorkeeper's lodge. Old and heavy-moustached like Fede, she was sitting with her legs apart, a foot-warmer between her feet and a heap of chicory in her lap which she was preparing. I put my head in at the door and asked her: "I say, was it you who invented the story that Filomena entertains a man called Mario, when I'm out?"

She was annoyed, and answered at once: "No one's invented anything. . . . It was your wife who told me herself."

"Filomena?"

"Yes . . . She said to me: such and such a young man is coming to see me, and he's called Mario. If Gino's at home, tell him not to come up: but if Gino isn't there, tell him to come. . . . He's up there now."

"He's up there now?"

"Certainly he is. . . . He went up about an hour ago."

And so Mario not merely existed, but he was with Filomena now, in the flat, and had been there for an hour. I dashed to the staircase, rushed up to the third floor and knocked at the door. Filomena came to open it, and I noticed at once that she, usually so placid and serene, had a frightened look. "Well," I said, "so Mario comes to see you when I'm not there."

"But what on earth . . . ?" she began.

"I know all about it," I shouted; and I started to go in. But she barred the way, saying: "Take it easy . . . What does it matter to you? Come back a little later."

At this, I couldn't contain myself any longer. I gave

her a slap in the face and shouted: "Ah, so that's it, is it? It's not supposed to matter to me?" Then I pushed her aside and ran into the kitchen.

The devil take women's gossip, the devil take women! There, indeed, was Mario, sitting at the table drinking coffee; but it wasn't Mario the cabinet-maker, it wasn't Mario the greengrocer, it wasn't Mario the pork-butcher's son, it wasn't any of the Marios I had thought of on my way home. It was simply Filomena's brother Mario who had been in prison for two years for burglary. Knowing that the day would come when he came out of prison, I had said to her: "Now mind, I don't ever want him in my house. . . . I don't want even to hear him mentioned." But she, poor girl, being fond of her brother in spite of his being a thief, had nevertheless decided to see him when I wasn't at home. Mario, seeing me beside myself with rage, rose to his feet. I said to him, breathlessly: "Oh, hullo, Mario."

"I'm going away," he said limply. "Don't worry . . . I'm going away . . . What's the matter, anyhow? Anyone would think I'd got the plague."

I heard Filomena sobbing in the passage, and I felt ashamed, now, of what I had done. "No, no, stay," I said confusedly, "stay for today . . . stay for dinner. . . . It's all right, Filomena, isn't it?" I added, turning to her as she came to the door, wiping her eyes, "it's all right if Mario stays to dinner?"

Well, I did my best to put things right, and then I went into the bedroom, called Filomena and gave her a kiss; and we made peace again. There still remained, however, the question of the gossip. I hesitated for a little and then said to Mario: "Come, Mario. . . . Come along to the workshop; it may be that the boss will give you something to do." He followed me out; and when we were on the stairs I added: "No one knows you here. . . . These last years you've been working in Milan—see?"

"O.K."

We went downstairs. When we came to the doorkeeper's lodge, I took Mario by the arm and introduced him, saying: "This is Mario . . . my brother-in-law. . . . He's just come from Milan. . . . He'll be staying with us here now."

"A great pleasure, I'm sure. . . ."

"The pleasure is entirely mine," I thought as we went

out into the street. Through the chatter of these women, I had wasted a thousand lire; and now, into the bargain, I had a thief in the house.

APPETITE

IF, one morning, you happen to be near the big Policlinico hospital and go past the spot where its walls are thickly covered with little white tablets proclaiming gratitude for favours received or hope for favours to come, and looking like so many stamps stuck on an envelope, you will see, not far from the niche with the figure of the Madonna in it, a fine, large flower-stall, full of vases of flowers, of coloured statuettes, and of baskets of flowers all ready arranged with ribbons and everything. There the relations and friends of the poor sick people buy flowers for them; and indeed this stall supplies the whole quarter. The florist is a stout, tall, fair woman, and she has a son, made after her own likeness, who helps her in the business. Carlo, his name is, and he is nineteen and already weighs well over fifteen stone. Take note of him, have a good look at him; he has a fat face all covered with freckles, he wears strong glasses, being shortsighted, and his red hair is cut in a brush. His chest shakes at every movement, like a woman's; he has a paunch that sticks out, and a pair of monumental legs. He always dresses in the American style, with a wind-jacket and striped trousers: the jacket fits him as closely as an undervest; and as for the trousers, every time he bends down you get the impression that they are going to split up the back. Carlo and I were friends but no longer are, and I am sorry for this, if for no other reason than that, with his remarkable physical appearance, he banished all sign of gloom. If you were feeling melancholy, you had only to watch Carlo eating: my goodness, what an appetite! I have never seen anyone to touch Carlo. He was capable of putting down over a pound of *spaghetti al sugo,* with bread, as if it was noth-

ing at all, and then declaring, in a discontented sort of way: "I don't feel as though I'd eaten anything. . . . I say, Mum, I'm hungry." Indeed sometimes his friends invited him out to a restaurant for the sheer pleasure of watching him eat. And he didn't need any encouragement: one evening, at the Stelletta restaurant, he devoured an entire good-sized lamb, munching and crunching the whole thing and leaving nothing on the plate but a little heap of bones. He did not get these feasts at home, for his mother was stingy, and with flowers there's not much left over for sumptuous living. For this reason he himself, knowing that to watch him eat was considered rather a sight, would make the suggestion: "Are you going to invite me out this evening? I agree to eat as much as you like, without any limits; is that a bargain?"

One Sunday, Carlo informed me that we had both been invited to dinner at the home of his fiancée, Faustina. I was surprised, because I was not on intimate terms with Faustina's family, and I could not see any reason for the invitation. But when we met by appointment at the Corso d'Italia and I saw him, I understood what the reason was. Carlo, hands in pockets, looked gloomy and discouraged and was full of sighs. While we were on our way to Faustina's, I enquired what was the matter and a sigh was his only answer. I persisted: another sigh. "Now listen," I said finally, "if you don't want to tell me, don't . . . but do stop sighing. . . . You're like a seal."

"Why, do seals sigh?"

"No, but if they did, they'd sigh like you."

He sighed again and then explained: "I got them to invite you today so that you could help me. . . . Will you promise?"

I promised to help him, and then, still sighing, he went on: "Faustina doesn't want me any more."

I must confess that my first feeling was one of satisfaction. Faustina attracted me, and I had never understood what she had seen in Carlo. But I am a good friend and I had never ventured, I don't say to flirt with her, but even to let her see how I felt. With a pretence of indifference, I said: "Well, I'm sorry, but what can *I* do about it?"

"There's a great deal you can do. . . . Faustina won't

pay any attention to me; but she's a little afraid of you . . . and you're good at talking. . . . She didn't want to see me again, but I insisted on an explanation and so she invited us to the house: you must talk to her and tell her how fond I am of her and that she mustn't desert me."

I replied that women don't allow themselves to be convinced by reasoning; but in the end, as he was so pressing, I agreed. By this time we had reached the house where Faustina lived, close to the markets of the Piazza Alessandria. We mounted the stairs and knocked at the door; Faustina's mother, a small, grey-haired woman, came to open it, a charcoal-fan in her hand, and cried: "At least *you*'ve come, anyhow," and then darted off back to the kitchen. We went through into the dining-room, which on weekdays was used as a fitting-room by Faustina's father who was a tailor. Here a table was laid for eight people; the four walls were covered with fashion-plates and pages cut out of fashion magazines, and in one corner stood a dressmaker's dummy with a woman's jacket tacked together on it. The flat seemed to be in a state of great confusion: one could hear Faustina's mother raising her voice in anger and somebody else answering her. Then the door burst open and Faustina came in. She was a girl of about eighteen, small and slight, with curly hair, a retreating forehead, green eyes and a big mouth—not beautiful, but provocative. "Hullo, Carlo, hullo, Mario," she cried gaily, "Mother's in a rage because she had prepared spaghetti for eight people and now Daddy and Gino and Alfredo have told us they won't be in to dinner because of the football match, and Annamaria is not coming either because she's been invited out by her fiancé . . . and I'm just going out, because I've had an invitation too. . . . So there are only the three of you left, and Mother's angry because she says, though she can keep the meat for another time, she can't keep the spaghetti."

She said this all in one breath; then, pulling up her dress at the back so that it shouldn't get crumpled, she threw herself down on an old yellow divan which was all burst and broken, and went on: "Now listen, Carlo, I asked you to come here today with your friend because Mother told me I must do that much for you. . . . But I'm telling you at once: it's no good your persisting. . . ."

I don't know why these words, which were uttered with perfect coolness, gave me so much pleasure. And all the more because, as she spoke them, she looked not at Carlo but at me; and our eyes met; and she, so it seemed to me, smiled at me with a certain coquettishness. Carlo, in the meantime, was whimpering: "But if you don't want me, what ever am I to do?"

She started to laugh heartily, showing a wide expanse of small teeth: "You'll find another girl . . . or perhaps you won't. . . . It doesn't matter to me, provided we give up seeing each other, because I'm thoroughly sick of it."

"But why are you sick of it? . . . What have I done to you? . . . Why are you angry with me?"

She jumped up, but in a gay sort of way, still looking, with those green eyes, at me rather than him. "I'm angry with you for what you are—a great fat glutton that does nothing but guzzle. . . . All you think of is eating, and the more you eat the fatter you get. . . . My friends tell me I'm marrying King Farouk. . . . Why, beside you, I look like a flea beside an elephant. . . . I'm not the right person for you."

"But I'm very fond of you."

"And I'm *not* fond of you . . . not the least bit."

Have you ever seen a fat man crying? A thin man, when he cries, looks sincere; but a fat man looks as if he were putting it on. Carlo took off his glasses and began sobbing into his handkerchief. Faustina's mother came in with a soup-tureen full of spaghetti and tomato sauce, and asked in a surprised voice: "Whatever's happened? What's the matter with Carlo?"

"He's crying," said Faustina gaily, shrugging her shoulders; "it does him good." Then, getting up again from the divan, she went on: "Well, I'm going out now. . . . You insisted on coming, and I've repeated again what I've already told you, and now I'm going out. . . . I've got things to do."

"But aren't you going to have something to eat?" cried her mother.

"No, I'll have something later. . . . Will you put something aside for me? . . . Good-bye, Carlo, and enjoy your dinner. . . . So long, Mario." As she said this she shook my hand, looking straight at me with her green eyes; and

I was aware that she was not so much shaking my hand as stroking my fingers with hers.

"Well, then," said her mother irritably, "there's nobody left but you two. . . . You'd better sit down and begin."

"I'm not hungry," said Carlo. But, as if by enchantment, his tears had dried, and his eyes were resting upon the soup-tureen.

I myself was really not hungry: Faustina's glances and the contact of her fingers had excited me. "Suppose we go away?" I hazarded.

"And throw away all the food?" cried Faustina's mother, placing her hands on her hips: "home-made *pasta*! . . . Get on with you—sit down and start."

"I'm not hungry," protested Carlo again, feebly.

But at that moment Faustina appeared in the doorway and cried: "Don't try and make us believe you're not hungry. . . . Come along, my dear, come and have something to eat." She threw herself upon him as he sat huddled on the divan, seized him by the hand, forced him to rise and seat himself at the table, tied his napkin round his neck and put his fork into his hand. In the meantime, her mother, well pleased, was pouring out a mountain of spaghetti on to Carlo's plate. Carlo kept repeating, in a voice choked with feeling: "I'm not hungry." However, the smoking plateful in front of him, with its beautiful bright colour of fresh tomato, evidently made his mouth water, for, still repeating "I'm not hungry" in a tearful voice, he started mournfully twining the *pasta* round his fork.

"*Buon appetito*!" cried Faustina, darting out of the room again.

Her mother, too, had left the room, after filling my plate. Carlo raised his *pasta*-laden fork and then, in a whining sort of voice, said slowly: "Mario, do go and talk to Faustina, before she goes out. . . . It might happen that with *you,* if you talked to her alone . . ." He did not finish, but bent his head and put the spaghetti into his mouth. And all the time, while he was eating, the tears went on flowing from his eyes. Well pleased with the idea, I said: "You're right, it's quite possible that she'll pay attention to me if I talk to her alone. . . . You go on eating. . . . I'll be back in a moment."

I left the room and went straight into Faustina's bedroom. She was standing in front of the wardrobe looking-glass, in a greenish undergarment, touching up her lips. I closed the door, went over to her and, putting my arm round her waist, said simply: "Can we meet tomorrow?"

She looked at me sideways with her green eyes and said, obviously delighted: "Not tomorrow, today."

"Today? When?"

"Wait for me in the bar down below, in half an hour's time."

I said nothing, but turned on my heel and went out. I returned to the dining-room. Carlo was now eating with a good appetite but in a leisurely manner: his plate was already half empty. "I'm very sorry," I said to him, "but she turned me out of the room. . . . I'm sorry."

He finished swallowing a mouthful, and then, bending his head and sobbing as he rolled some more spaghetti round his fork, he muttered: "Dirty slut! . . . And when I think how much I love her!"

I had started eating too, now, for my appetite, after my visit to Faustina, had returned, and the *pasta* was really excellent—light, with plenty of sauce and a touch of sharp-flavoured sheep's-milk cheese. Carlo resumed: "I don't ever want to see her again . . . not even if she begs me." His plate was empty and he helped himself to another portion out of the tureen.

"You're quite right," I said.

In the end the two of us—but more especially Carlo—finished about half the contents of the tureen. Faustina's mother came in and suggested—but only as a matter of form—that we might like a few slices of ham or sausage. I said we had had enough and got up from the table, though from the expression on the face of Carlo, who had remained seated, I saw that he would not have been at all displeased to go on eating. And so, sighing and wiping first his mouth and then his eyes with his napkin, he rose too; and we took our leave of Faustina's mother and went out. As soon as we were in the street, I said to Carlo: "Well, I must go, I have an appointment"; and, without giving him time to draw breath, I made my escape.

I wandered round the neighbourhood for a little and then, at the time arranged, went to the bar. Faustina

was awaiting me, looking very smart in a tight-fitting mauve dress, with a bunch of violets in her hand. She at once took hold of my arm, saying: "You silly, why did it take you so long to see that I liked you?"

I had no time to answer. We were passing, at that moment, a little baker's shop where they sold hot cakes, straight out of the oven. In the doorway, a puff-pastry tartlet in his hand, his mouth full and his face all smeared with vanilla icing, stood Carlo. I smelt the good smell of the bakery before I saw him, and then I saw that he had seen us as we walked along close together, arm in arm. But Faustina was not disconcerted. "Good-bye, Carlo," she called to him as we went on our way.

THE NURSE

I OWN a nursery garden out at the Garden City and every morning, as I go along the Via Nomentana in the bus, I cannot help looking at the iron gates of a particular villa just beyond the church of Sant' Agnese. Some years ago I was the gardener at this villa, and it was I who planted the espaliers of jasmine against the surrounding wall; just as it was I who arranged the big pots with camellias in them all round the open space before the front door, and trained the wistaria up the wall of the house—which, if it isn't dead, must by now have reached the second floor. Owing, in fact, to the illness of the owner, the garden of the villa had been abandoned and looked more like a piece of ground where they dump rubbish than a garden; but I, out of love for the nurse who looked after this gentleman, turned it in a few months into a kind of greenhouse, with grass plots, gravelled paths, clumps of lilac-bushes, and trimmed box hedges round the flower-beds and along the paths. I also planted, I remember, in the middle of a plot of earth straight in front of Nella's window, a well-grown magnolia of the kind known as *grandiflora,* so that in springtime the smell of the flowers might penetrate right into her

room; and under her window I planted a japonica, that beautiful climbing plant with black branches and red flowers. Nella was the nurse with whom I was in love: a sturdy girl, not very tall, with red hair, a broad, fresh face all covered with freckles, and glasses for short sight. I took a fancy to her at once because she was so strong and healthy, with an exuberant body which always seemed as though it must burst out of her white uniform; and also because of the placid but knowing look which her freckles and glasses gave her. She looked like a lady doctor; and it was, above all, the contrast between her air of severity and her youthful, lively body that made me lose my head.

At that time the health of the gentleman she was looking after was more important to me than my own, because I knew that, if he got well or died, she would go away and I should no longer be able to see her so easily. And so, every morning during that spring, when she opened the window of the room where the invalid was and looked out into the garden, I contrived by some means to be just below, and I would immediately ask: "How is he?"; and she would answer with a gesture: "So-so", smiling slyly because she knew the cause of my solicitude. Then, during the morning, I used often to see her, always at that same window, either pouring medicine into a glass or examining the needle of a syringe before giving an injection. I would make signs to her with my hands, but all she would ever do was to shake her head, as much as to say: "Can't you see I'm in *his* room?" For she was conscientious in her work, more than a man would have been; and she slyly made use of her work to keep me sighing, just as some girls try to make themselves appear more precious by always dragging their unwilling mothers into everything; it is really they themselves who are behaving coyly.

During the mornings I generally managed to spend my time in the open space in front of the house, because the invalid's window looked out in that direction; in the afternoons, on the other hand, since I knew that the invalid slept after lunch and that she took advantage of this to see me, I used to go and work at the far end of the garden, which was a very large one, behind a grove of ilexes, where there was a fountain against the boundary wall.

Almost always, at about two or three o'clock, she would come there and we would be together for half an hour or an hour. I would cut a flower or two for her, a gardenia, a camellia, a rose; and she, to please me, would pin it on the bosom of her uniform. Then she would sit down on the rim of the fountain and I would speak to her of my love. I was seriously in love and, from the very beginning, I told her I wanted to marry her. She would listen to me with that knowing expression on her face, without opening her mouth. "Nella," I said to her, "I want us to get married and I want us to have lots of children—one every year. . . . You know what fine children they'd be: you're beautiful, and I'm not ugly myself." She laughed and said: "Poor me! . . . And how are we going to support them?" "I shall work," I replied; "I want to start a nursery garden." "But I want to go on being a nurse," she said. "A nurse indeed!" I retorted; "you'll be a wife." "I *don't* want children and I *do* want to be a nurse," said she. "Sick people are *my* children." But she was smiling, and she allowed me to take her hand. But when, after one thing and another, I tried to kiss her, she pushed me away at once and rose to her feet, saying: "I must go to *him.*" "But perhaps he's asleep." "Yes, perhaps he is, but if he wakes up and doesn't see me, he'd be so upset it might even kill him: he doesn't want anyone at his bedside except me." At such moments I hated the invalid, although it was owing to him that I had got to know her. And so she would go away, and I, in a rage, would seize a rake and rake the gravel with such force that the soil would come spirting up together with the pebbles.

Never once did she kiss me. But sometimes she would allow me to admire her hair, which was, together with her eyes, her best feature. I used to ask her: "Let me see your hair." "How tiresome you are!" she would protest gently; but in the end she would allow me to take off the handkerchief that was tied round her head and then to remove, one by one, the pins. For a moment her hair, red and thick, would remain in a mass on her head, like a copper crown. Then she would give a little shake; and her hair would fall down over her shoulders in waves, right down to her waist; and she would stay quite still, beneath that mass of hair, looking fixedly at me

through her glasses. Then I would put out my hand and, delicately, take the glasses off. With her glasses on she had a somewhat hypocritical look, but without glasses her eyes, which were large, soft, liquid, as it were melting, and of a chestnut brown colour, gave her face a quite different expression, an expression both languid and inviting. And so I would gaze at her without touching her; and she, becoming in the end perhaps a little embarrassed, would hastily tie the handkerchief round her head again and put the glasses back on her nose.

I was so much in love that I remember saying to her one day: "I wish I could get ill too . . . then you would have to look after me." "You're crazy," she answered with a smile; "you're perfectly well and you want to be ill!" "Yes," I said, "I want to be ill. . . . If I was, you might pass your hand over my forehead every now and then to see if I had any fever . . . and you'd wash my face in the morning with warm water . . . and when I needed it, you'd come quickly to the rescue with the bedpan, and wait till I'd finished." This last remark made her laugh. "Really you're ridiculous," she said. "D'you suppose we nurses enjoy doing things like that?" "No," I answered, "I don't suppose you enjoy it, nor do the patients . . . but still, it would be better than nothing."

There are many more things I could relate if I would, for, as is well known, in love even the smallest things appear important; especially when, as in this case, love is brought to a halt in its first stages and never succeeds in arriving at the conclusion it longs for. As I heard that the invalid was getting better and would soon be rising from his bed, I became more insistent on the question of marriage. But she kept prevaricating, first giving me to understand that I was by no means displeasing to her, and then telling me that she did not love me enough. I thought she might be hesitating before finally surrendering, and that these were the waverings of a tree that has been sawn through, before it falls. And then one afternoon she left me breathless by saying calmly: "Why don't you come along underneath my window tonight? . . . After midnight. . . . We can have a talk."

That evening I hid in the garden and waited for midnight, sitting on the rim of the fountain, behind the grove of ilexes. At the time arranged, I went underneath her

window and whistled, as had been agreed. Immediately the shutters were thrown open and she appeared, a white figure in the black opening of the window. She whispered to me: "Give me a hand, quick!"; and I barely had time to prepare myself before she had climbed over the sill and fallen into my arms. She was so heavy that we almost rolled on the ground together; but we recovered ourselves and went off along the wall of the house, on the terrace. "Well now, Lionello," she said to me in a low voice, "you're really sure you want to marry me?"; and I, more because of the tone in which the words were spoken—more tender than ever before—than of the words themselves, fell on my knees, just where I was, and put my arms round her legs, pressing my face against the coarse stuff of her apron. I could feel her hand stroking my head and, deeply moved though I was, I said to myself, quite coolly: "Well, here we are, and that's that." Just at that moment, however, there came to us the sound of a bell ringing in her room. If it had been the most beloved of lovers calling her, she could not have been more prompt. "Quick, quick," she said; and she pushed me away so that I almost fell on the ground; "quick—he's calling me. . . . Quick, help me get back through the window." That blasted bell went on ringing; she rushed to the window, I helped her to climb up, and she vanished. A moment later I saw a light appear in the window of the invalid's bedroom, showing that Nella was already with him, and then, for the first time, I experienced the feeling of jealousy.

What happened that night, in that man's bedroom, I do not know; but next morning Nella did not appear at her window; nor did she come, after lunch, to our usual meeting-place at the fountain. Three or four days passed in this way; and then, one afternoon, I saw her at last, but not alone: she was walking across the open space in front of the house, close beside the invalid, supporting him; he, a very tall, pale, fairish, middle-aged man in pyjamas, was leaning on her with his arm round her shoulders; while she, docile and loving, was holding him round the waist and regulating her step to suit his. I was astonished when I saw them; then, after they had disappeared round the corner of the house, I turned towards a manservant who was also watching them, from

the front doorstep, and he made a sign to me as much as to say: "They've fallen for each other." Feigning indifference, I questioned him: and so I came to know that there was talk in the villa that the master of the house actually intended to marry Nella. To tell the truth, I made no further enquiries: I concluded that she was a woman like plenty of others and that, for her, money counted more than love. I am inclined to act quickly on impulse and in certain cases I do not have to think for very long in order to make a decision: that same day I packed up and left the villa, never to return.

For a long time after that, every time I thought of Nella I imagined her as that gentleman's wife, living in the villa no longer as a nurse but as mistress of the house. I also imagined that, if he fell ill again, she would no longer look after him so lovingly: as his widow, she would have finally attained the purpose for which she had married him. But sometimes one is wrong in thinking that interest or feeling are the only two things by which people live. There are those who are guided neither by interest nor by feeling but by some other, quite special, motive, unknown to everyone but themselves. Nella was one of these.

A couple of years later I presented myself at a villa on the Janiculum, where I had been called in to arrange a greenhouse of tropical plants. Even while I was waiting in the hall I was conscious of a curious atmosphere of circumspection, almost of mourning: all windows closed, whisperings, comings and goings, a smell of disinfectants, hushed sounds. Then, all of a sudden, I saw her at the top of the stairs, in her nurse's uniform, just as I had seen her the last time, a handkerchief on her head, spectacles on her nose, a tray in her hands. She was coming down, and therefore could not help encountering me. As she came near me she stopped, and I said to her, half sad and half teasing: "Still a nurse, eh, Nella? . . . Weren't you supposed to be getting married?" She smiled, in the placid, rather sly way which had once caused me to lose my head, and said: "Who told you that story? . . . Didn't I say I never wished to get married but wanted to go on being a nurse?" "Sour grapes," I replied. Now would you believe it? She looked at me for a moment and then shook her head and answered: "D'you know,

this one's fallen in love with me too? . . . But I can't tell you all about it now. . . . If you're coming to work here, we'll have a talk later on. . . . My window's on the ground floor, looking out on the garden." She went away, but before going she threw me a glance as much as to say: "That's agreed, isn't it?" I concluded then that—perhaps precisely because she herself was so strong and healthy—she must evidently find some special enjoyment in carrying on love affairs with sick people. But I, alas, was healthy; and so for me there was not the slightest hope. I relinquished the job on the spot, and, without waiting to be called, crept out of the house on tiptoe.

THE TREASURE

AT the time when I was working as a waiter at an inn outside the Porta San Pancrazio, a certain market-gardener used to be a regular customer there; everyone called him Marinese, either because he belonged to Marino, or, more probably, because he was particularly fond of the Marino wine. This man Marinese was extremely old; even he himself did not know how old he was. However, he used to drink more than most young men, and when he was drinking he would chat with anyone who cared to listen—or even, indeed, to himself. As everyone knows, we waiters in inns, except when we are actually serving, spend our time listening to the conversation of the customers. Marinese, amongst a great many untrue stories, used often to tell one particular one that had an appearance of truth—that the Germans had stolen a chest of silver from the villa of a prince near by, and had buried it in a spot which he, Marinese, knew. Sometimes, if he was really drunk, he would allow it to be understood that this spot was in his own market garden. Anyhow, he used to say that, if he wanted to, he could become rich. And that some day he *would* want to. When? "When I'm old and don't want to go on working," he said, on one occasion, to somebody who asked

him. And this was a ridiculous answer because, if you looked at him, you could see he must be at least eighty.

Well, I began thinking about this treasure, and I was convinced that it existed because, some years back—during the occupation, in fact—such a theft had really taken place and the Prince had never got his silver back. When I thought of it, it enraged me that it should be in the hands of Marinese, who, some day or other, would be suddenly struck dead in his hut, and then—good-bye to the treasure. I tried to ingratiate myself with him, but the old man, like a true swindler, made me stand him drinks and then would not open his mouth. "Even if you were my son," he finally said to me, with great solemnity, "I wouldn't tell you. . . . You're young and you can work. . . . The ones who need money are the old people who are tired and can't go on any longer." In the end, in desperation, I took the other waiter into my confidence—Remigio, who was pale and fair and younger than me. He was immediately excited at the idea—but in a foolish sort of way, like the fool that he was—and began building castles in the air: we would get rich, he would buy a motor-bicycle, we would open a bar together, and so on. I said to him: "The first thing to do is to find this treasure . . . and don't get over-excited about it. . . . We'll divide it into four—three shares for me and one for you: is that all right?" He agreed to this, still in a state of elation. And we made an appointment for that same night; after midnight, at the beginning of the old Via Aurelia.

It was the beginning of May, and, what with the starry sky, and the brilliant moon that lit up everything like daylight, and the soft air, I did not even feel that I was doing anything wrong in assaulting an old man: I deluded myself into thinking the whole thing was a joke. We started off along the Via Aurelia, between its ancient walls, behind which are market gardens and the gardens of convents. I was carrying a spade, in case Marinese refused to let us have his, and I had given Remigio a small iron shovel, just so as to make him do something. I had bought a revolver and a charge of ammunition in the Piazza Vittorio, but I had put down the safety catch: you never know. To tell the truth, I too was feeling elated at the idea of the treasure and I regretted now

having spoken of it to Remigio: it meant one share less which I might have had for myself. Besides, I knew he was a chatterbox, and that, if he talked, the game would end in prison. This thought worried me as we walked along between the walls. And so, all at once I stopped, and, pulling out the revolver, which so far I had not shown him, I said: "Now mind, if you talk I'll kill you." "But, Alessandro," he said, trembling all over, "what d'you take me for?" I went on: "We shall have to give some little thing to Marinese, so that he'll have his own interest in the affair and won't report us. . . . That means you'll have to give him something out of your share. . . . Is that understood?" He said yes, and I put the revolver back in its case and we walked on.

A little farther down the road, on the right, there was an ancient gateway, with pillars and a Latin inscription on the pediment. The gates themselves were painted green, and were all faded and broken; and I knew that behind those gates lay Marinese's market garden. I looked up and down the road, and, seeing that there was nobody about, pushed open the gate, which was unfastened, and went in, followed by Remigio.

When I looked at the garden—although I had not come to buy vegetables—I must admit that I almost let forth a cry of admiration. What a garden! In front of us, in the strong white moonlight, lay, in fact, the most beautiful vegetable garden I had ever seen. Glistening irrigation furrows stretched away in long straight lines, as though they had been traced out with a set-square; and between the furrows the vegetable plants, in rows, looked as if they were ascending in procession—playing the fool in the moonlight—towards Marinese's little hut, which could just be seen up at the top of the garden. There were gigantic lettuces, of the kind of which one is enough to fill the greengrocer's scales; splendid tomato-plants, supported on canes, and amongst the leaves tomatoes still green but big enough to burst; cabbages the size of a child's head; onions tall and straight as swords; artichokes, three or four to a plant; and there were endives, peas, beans, other kinds of lettuce—in short, all the vegetables of the season. Here and there, on the ground, as though left for anyone who wished to pick them up, I saw numbers of aubergines and cucumbers. There were

also fruit trees, such as plums, peaches, apples, and pears, growing low and thick, full of still unripe fruit peeping out from amongst the leaves in the moonlight. You felt that every plant and tree had an intimate knowledge of the gardener's hand; and that it was not only profit by which that hand was guided. Remigio, who was thinking only of the treasure, asked impatiently: "Where's Marinese?" "Over there," I answered, pointing to the hut at the far end of the garden.

We walked along a little path between a row of garlic and a row of celery. Remigio put his foot on a lettuce, and I said to him: "You clumsy fool, look where you're going." I stooped down and picked a leaf from the lettuce he had trodden on, and put it in my mouth: it was sweet and fleshy and as fresh as though it had been washed in dew. And so we came to the hut; and Marinese's dog, which knew me, instead of barking came to meet me wagging its tail: it was a yellow dog, of the kind that market gardeners always have, but intelligent. I knocked at the closed door of the hut, gently at first, then louder, and finally, when nobody appeared, hammered at it with my fists and feet. His voice made us both jump, coming, as it did, not from inside the hut but from a clump of bushes near by. "Who is it? What d'you want?"

He had a spade in his hand; evidently he was busy in his garden even at night. He came towards us in the moonlight, his arms hanging loosely, his back bent, his face red and his chin bristling with white hairs—a typical gardener whose time, from dawn till sunset, is spent stooping over his vegetables. I answered him at once: "Friends"; and he replied: "I haven't any friends." Then he came closer and added: "But you—I know you. . . . Aren't you Alessandro?" I told him I was indeed Alessandro; and, pulling the pistol out of my pocket, but without pointing it, I commanded him: "Marinese, tell us where the treasure is. . . . We'll share it between us. . . . But if you won't tell us, we're going to take it just the same." At the same time I raised the pistol, but he put his big hand upon it, as much as to say there was no need for that; then he bent his head and asked, in a thoughtful sort of way: "What treasure d'you mean?" "The silver; the silver that was stolen by the Germans." "But which Germans?" "The soldiers, during the occupa-

tion. . . . They stole it from that Prince. . . ." "What Prince?" "Prince—*you* know; and you said they'd buried it in the garden. . . ." "But what garden?" "*Your* garden, Marinese. . . . And don't play the fool. You know where it is . . . tell us and be done with it." Then, his head still bowed, he enunciated slowly: "Ah, you mean the treassure?" "Yes of course, the treasure." "Come along then," he said eagerly: "we'll dig it up at once. Have you a spade? Take this one. . . . Come along and we'll give *him* a spade too. . . . Come on." I was somewhat astonished because I had not expected him to agree so quickly; but I followed him. He went round behind the hut, still muttering: "The treasure. . . . Now you'll see what a fine treasure it is"; and came back with a spade which he handed to Remigio. Then he started off, repeating: "Come along. . . . You want the treasure, and you shall have it."

The stretch of ground behind the hut was not cultivated, but was full of odds and ends and rubbish-heaps. Farther on, there was a row of trees and, behind them, a high wall, similar to the boundary wall of the garden on the side of the Via Aurelia. He took the path that ran along beside the trees, and went right to the farthest point of the garden, where the wall formed an angle. Here he turned suddenly, and, stamping his foot on the ground, said: "Dig here. . . . The treasure is here."

I took my spade and immediately began digging. Remigio, spade in hand, watched me. "You dig too," Marinese said to him; "don't you want any treasure?" Whereupon Remigio threw himself into the digging with such furious violence that Marinese added: "Steady on, take it quietly . . . there's plenty of time." At these words Remigio slackened speed and brought down the spade on his own foot. Marinese took hold of the spade, and turning it in his hands, said to him: "You must hold it like this . . . and each time it goes into the ground, you must press it down with your foot. . . . Otherwise you'll never learn to dig." Then he added: "Dig the same distance each way—about a couple of yards, not more. . . . The treasure's underneath there. . . . In the meantime I'm going to take a look round." "No, you don't," I said; "you stay here." "What are you afraid of?" he answered. "I've told you the treasure is yours."

So we went on digging, first, as best we could, breaking the surface, and then going deeper and deeper down, following the lines of a square which I had marked out with the point of my spade. The soil was hard and dry, and full of stones and roots; I threw the earth to one side, in a heap, and Marinese, who was doing nothing, thrust aside the stones with his foot or gave us advice. "Not so fast. . . . Tear away that root. . . . Take out that stone." Up came a long, black bone, and he took it and said: "It's a beef-bone. . . . You see, you're beginning to find things now." I could not make out whether he was speaking seriously or in jest. In spite of the coolness of the night I was damp with sweat; every now and then I looked at Remigio, and it made me angry to see that he too was panting and toiling zealously. We went on digging for quite a long time, and still nothing appeared: by this time we had made a square hole over three feet deep, and the soil at the bottom of it was moist and crumbling and brown, but there was no sign of any box or sack or other receptacle. All of a sudden I ordered Remigio to stop; and then I climbed out of the hole and said to Marinese: "Now tell me, where *is* this treasure? There's absolutely nothing here, and I believe you've been fooling us."

He took his pipe out of his mouth and answered at once: "You want to see the treasure? All right, I'll show it to you now." This time I did not prevent his going, for I was exhausted and, in my heart of hearts, I had almost ceased to mind about the treasure. I watched him as he went off in the direction of another small hut which I had not noticed before, which was behind the trees, against the boundary wall. "He's running away," said Remigio. "No," I answered, leaning on my spade and wiping the sweat from my brow, "No, he's not running away." And indeed, a moment later Marinese came out of the hut wheeling a barrow brim-full, so it appeared to me, of straw. He went to the hole, upset the straw into it, and then, putting one foot inside, began levelling it down with his hands. I asked hesitatingly: "Well, how about the treasure?" "This is the treasure," he replied; "look how beautiful it is!" And at the same time, taking up a handful of straw, he crumbled the watery, stinking stuff under my nose. "Look!" he said, "isn't it like gold? . . .

It's the cow that made it. . . . You see what a treasure; where else will you find a treasure like that? . . . *That's* the treasure. . . ." He was talking to himself, indifferent to our presence; and then, still talking, he came up out of the hole, took the wheelbarrow, went and re-loaded it in the hut, brought it back to the hole and upset it there again. Once more he levelled it with his hands, still repeating: "Now you see the treasure. . . . This is the treasure." I looked at Remigio and Remigio looked at me, and then I plucked up courage and pulled out the revolver again. But Marinese at once brushed it aside as if it had been a mere piece of wood. "Stop it," he said; "none of that. . . . If you want silver, d'you know where you can find it?" "Where?" I asked innocently. "At a shop. . . . If you give them enough thousand-lire notes, you can have as much as you want." He had, in fact, been fooling us all the time. "What about this hole you made us dig?" asked Remigio in a subdued tone. "Why, that's my manure-pit . . . just what I was needing. . . . You've saved me the trouble."

My energy had all fizzled out. I reflected that I ought to threaten him, perhaps even to shoot him, but after all the digging and the disappointment, I felt quite incapable of it. So I said: "There isn't any treasure, then"; almost hoping that Marinese would confirm that it really didn't exist. But he, spiteful old devil that he was, answered: "There is and there isn't." "What d'you mean?" "I mean that, if you'd come in a friendly sort of way, in the daytime, there perhaps might have been . . . but as it is, there isn't." At the same time, taking no further notice of us, he started off towards the hut. I ran after him breathlessly and, taking him by the sleeve, said: "Marinese, for goodness' sake . . ." He half turned and asked: "Why don't you shoot me? Haven't you got a revolver?" "I don't want to shoot," I said. "Let's go halves." "Be honest, now," he said; "you haven't the courage to shoot. . . . You see, you're no good for anything. . . . Anyone else would shoot me. The Germans used to shoot." "But I'm not a German." "Well then, if you're not a German, good-night." With these words, he went into the hut and slammed the door in our faces.

So ended the story of the treasure. The following day, at the usual time, Marinese came into the inn, and, as I

brought him his litre of wine, he cried: "Ah, you're the one who was after the treasure. . . . And what have you done with your pistol?" Luckily no one took any notice of this, because, as I said before, he chattered a great deal and most of what he said was nonsense. But, all the same, I did not feel safe; and also I did not like being made a fool of in front of Remigio, who knew all about it and laughed just as if he had not believed in the treasure himself. So I took advantage of an offer I had and went to work in a restaurant in Trastevere, in the Piazza San Cosimato. But Remigio stayed on at San Pancrazio.

THE CARETAKER

I LIKE to be alone because people tease me on account of my glasses and of my feminine voice, which causes me to stutter, into the bargain, when I get excited. So, when the company offered me the job of caretaker at one of its depôts, about fifteen miles out along the Via Salaria, I accepted without any discussion. The depôt was in a wide valley, between bald, green hills. Imagine a barren, dusty, four-sided enclosure at the bottom of the valley, with a boundary wall consisting of stacked-up new bricks, and a number of long, low huts against the wall with, in the middle of each, a crooked barrel beneath a sharply-bent drainpipe. Inside the huts there was a bit of everything: bags of cement, lengths of piping, tiles, barrels of tar, piles of beams, bricks; and one of the huts served as a habitation for me: a couple of bare rooms, a camp-bed, a table and a few chairs. In this place you seemed to be right out in the open country, far from the world, but you merely had to climb up one of the hills near by in order to see, quite close, the Via Salaria running in a straight line between rows of white-streaked plane trees, and, a little way down the road, the signboard of the Osteria dei Cacciatori where I had my meals. I had been given a pistol and a certain quantity of ammunition, and a shotgun with which I sometimes went

shooting in the hills. There was no one else there, and, except for going the rounds at night, there was nothing to do.

I spent four months in this place without anything happening. Then, one evening, there was a knock at the door. I went to open it, thinking it must be someone belonging to the company, but found myself face to face with two men and a woman. One of the men I knew well; he was called Rinaldi and was a lorry-driver; and he was the only one at the warehouse in town, where I had worked before, who did not tease me on account of my glasses and my voice. He was exactly the opposite of me: I look boorish, he looked like a gentleman; he was handsome, very dark, tall and strong, whereas I am ugly; I am not attractive to women, whereas he had as many women as he liked. It was perhaps for this reason also—because he was so different from me and because I should have liked to be like him—that I had become fond of him. With him was a woman called Emilia, who was small and round, with a pale, oval face, large, pale-grey eyes and a mouth that turned up at the corners, as though she were always smiling.

As for the other man, he belonged to Monterotondo and was called Teodoro: he had curly red hair, yellow eyes like a cat, a sharp-pointed nose and purple cheeks, as though a north-east wind were perpetually blowing in his face. Rinaldi said he had something to say to me and I brought him inside the hut. "Vincenzo," he said to me, after giving me a cigarette, "there's an opportunity for you to make a bit of money without any trouble . . . by going on being a caretaker, in fact." I opened my eyes very wide but did not say anything; and he, encouraged by my silence, went on to explain: they had a big lot of stuff, removed—let us put it like that—from a warehouse in the city. I should have to allow them to deposit this stolen property in one of my huts. Later, at a suitable time, they would arrange to take it away again: and then they would give me a certain quantity for myself.

I was all in a fever on hearing this suggestion; but refuse I could not. Rinaldi, to me, was like a brother. Stammering, I said: "Now listen, Rinaldi; I'm the caretaker here, aren't I?" "Certainly you are." "Well, I'm the caretaker and I want to go on being the caretaker."

"What d'you mean?" "I mean that you can do what you like, you can put your stuff in the hut, you can come and go . . . But I don't know anything about it, I haven't seen you, I don't know you. . . . And if by any chance they ask you, you can say that you don't know me. . . . I mean that you've put the stuff there without my knowledge." They nodded their heads in surprise. Teodoro said, almost threateningly: "But you'll keep an eye on the stuff, won't you? It might possibly happen, since you don't know us . . ." But Rinaldi interrupted him. "You don't know Vincenzo," he said; "you needn't worry." So I said again: "I'm the caretaker here. . . . Well then, I'll be caretaker for your stuff as well." Again Teodoro growled at me: "You needn't worry, you'll get your share." "You needn't worry either, blast you," I said resentfully; "I don't want anything from you—see?" Anyhow, we came to an agreement; and Rinaldi went out and came back, a little later, with the lorry. They unloaded the stuff into one of the huts, putting it behind some barrels, and I didn't even see it, but they told me it was textiles. Before she left, Emilia threw me a glance which seemed to me almost affectionate, and that was all the reward I had.

After that day they came again three or four times, always bringing Emilia. They would give a signal on the horn of the lorry and I would immediately open the gates; then they unloaded the stuff and went off. I did not want them to stop; while they were unloading, I stayed shut up in my hut. With that unpleasant Teodoro I had further arguments: he always behaved like a bully and I simply could not abide him. But Emilia used to smile at me and always had a few kind words for me. On one occasion she said to me: "Aren't you bored, always alone like this?" "I'm quite accustomed to being alone," I answered.

One day I opened the newspaper and saw that Teodoro, Rinaldi and several others had been arrested. The paper called them the "hole-in-the-wall gang", because they used to force their way into shops by making a hole in the wall of the shop next door. On other occasions they got in from the cellar, but always by making a hole. The paper published photographs of Rinaldi and Teodoro and of another man who was collarless and had his chin

up and his eyes very wide open. "Dangerous gang of criminals to be brought to justice," said the headlines. But Rinaldi, as driver, was less heavily compromised than the others, and of Emilia there was not a word.

It was winter, and one night when it was raining and blowing hard and the yard outside was like a lake, there was a knock at the door. I went and opened it and found Emilia standing there—and what a state she was in! She had become pregnant since I had seen her, and her belly was already big, and her whole pretty face looked as if it were being pulled downwards towards her belly; besides, she was soaked with the rain and looked as if she were dressed in rags, and her hair was all stuck to her face. She came in and without a word handed me a note from Rinaldi. In the note Rinaldi told me he would be coming out of prison in a year's time, and that he was entrusting me with Emilia meanwhile, paying me so much for her support; he also asked me to look after the stuff, which was all his, as the others had already had their share. That was all. It struck me that Rinaldi was convinced that he could do anything with me and it also struck me that he was quite right, because I felt I would do anything for him. So I told Emilia that, for that night, she should sleep in my bed and I would manage with pillows on the floor in the other room. Thus began our life together.

Some months from that time, anyone who came to the depôt would certainly have thought that I had taken a wife and was a happy husband and father. The October sunshine lay upon the yard, and, in the middle of it, Emilia, her sleeves rolled up over her pretty, round arms, was washing and rinsing my shirts in the water of the barrel; other clothes were hung up on ropes to dry; and I was sitting on a chair in the sun outside the hut, dandling in my arms Emilia's baby, which was called, like me, Vincenzo. Close beside the hut was another, smaller hut, which I had built myself; and from this little hut came the smell of gravy for the macaroni, for Emilia was now cooking for me and I no longer went to the inn. Anyone, as I say, who saw me playing with the baby and who saw Emilia speaking to me calmly and smilingly as she washed the clothes in the barrel, would have mistaken us for a happy family. And yet there was nothing

in it at all: the baby was Rinaldi's, Emilia was Rinaldi's, the stuff hidden in the hut was Rinaldi's, and I, just as I had formerly been caretaker of the company's property, so now I was caretaker of Rinaldi's property as well, Emilia and the baby included. In all other ways, however, it was just as though I were really married: Emilia was so very good to me and allowed me to lack nothing, and the baby was a well-behaved and very beautiful child. The only disadvantage, if anything, was that I had always to talk about Rinaldi to Emilia, who was counting the months and the days until he came out: not that I minded talking about him, but it is one thing to be a man's mistress, as Emilia was, and another to be, like me, his friend; and besides, it seemed as if he was the only man in the world, and that I did not exist. I said this to her, one evening; and she, as though she had just discovered for the first time that I was a man too, began, from that day onwards, to give me little pin-pricks on the subject of love. She was only joking, but it made me suffer and I realized how attractive she was to me. Finally I said to her, on one occasion: "You belong to Rinaldi, so you'd better not take any notice of me." "Of course I belong to Rinaldi," she answered, "but you're a true friend and you mustn't be jealous." And that was the end of that.

One night I thought I heard a noise. I got up, took my revolver and went out of the hut. It was a night of full moon, and the moon seemed to have tumbled into the water of the barrel which was glistening like silver. You could distinguish every stone and pebble in the yard, with its big or little shadow beside it; and the hills all round were black against a clear sky. It was almost like daylight, in fact; and so I found him at once. I called to him to halt where he was, just as he was trying to slip away between one hut and the next; and he immediately came out into the open and said: "Put down that pistol. Don't your recognize me?"

It was Teodoro, the man from Monterotondo, but surprisingly changed. He was dressed in rags, his hollow cheeks were covered with reddish down, and his yellow eyes stared like a wolf's. "I've come to take away that stuff," he said; "I've got a lorry and some friends waiting outside." "That stuff belongs to Rinaldi," I replied.

Well, we started arguing, and first he tried to bully me and then he suggested going half shares, but I refused. We were standing near the water-barrel, and a light had appeared in Emilia's little window and she was watching me. At last I said to him: "The best thing you can do is to go away"; and he answered: "I'm going, don't worry"; and then he started off towards the gate. But I followed him, keeping a careful eye on him, because I knew he was the type of man that uses a knife. And indeed, just before he reached the gate, he suddenly jumped at me. I took a step back and fired. Would you believe it? He still kept on coming towards me, his face stuck out, with those staring wolfish eyes, one hand to his chest, at the spot where I had hit him, and a knife in the other. I fired again and he fell to the ground.

Next morning the police started an enquiry, discovered that he had had previous convictions, that he had escaped from prison, and that was that. The company even sent me a present for having defended their property so well. I said to Emilia: "Rinaldi first turned me into a thief, and now into a murderer." "You acted in self-defence," she replied; "there's nothing more to be said." "I was only just talking," I said then; "I'm the caretaker and I had to shoot in any case."

It so happened, the very day that Rinaldi, out of prison at last, came to fetch Emilia and the baby and the textiles, the company informed me that the depôt was going to be dismantled as soon as possible: and so everything was coming to an end at the same time, and I should no longer be acting as caretaker for anybody, either for the company or for Rinaldi. He came one night, after midnight, with the lorry; and on its windscreen he had written, in white letters, EMILIA. "Rinaldi," I said, "here is Emilia, just as you sent her to me. . . . Here is your son. . . . And inside there are your textiles. All is in order, as you can see." He smiled, happy at being with Emilia and the baby, and said: "That's right, Vincenzo . . . I knew I could trust you. . . . That's fine." But I had a mingled feeling of anger and sadness and I felt breathless, and I repeated again: "Rinaldi, you can see that everything you entrusted me with, I'm giving back to you just exactly as it was." Then he wanted to give me some money, tried hard to make me a present of a watch, suggested taking me to Rome in the

lorry; but I refused everything, and said: "I don't want anything . . . I'm the caretaker, aren't I? . . . I don't want anything." I realized now that I had been in love with Emilia and that I was at the same time both sorry and glad that I had respected her. Well, I myself loaded the stuff into the lorry, and then he got in with Emilia who was smiling and holding the baby in her arms, wrapped in a blanket. He called out to me—and I daresay he said it without malice: "See you again soon, eh, Mr. Caretaker?" The lorry moved off.

A few days later the company's lorries arrived. They loaded up the bricks, the bags of cement, the pipes, the barrels of tar, then they pulled down the surrounding walls and took away the bricks of that too, and finally they turned their attention to the huts and took away the planks. All day long, for several days, the lorries came and went, in great clouds of dust, loading up and carrying away. At last, one morning, they pulled down my own hut and took that away too. I was the last thing left. There was nothing now except the level space of beaten earth upon which grass was already sprouting, and here and there pieces of broken brick, puddles of water, and, all round, the hills. I had spent almost two years in this place and now it was over. I had all my belongings in a fibre suitcase tied to the saddle of my bicycle. I wheeled the bicycle out and walked off towards the Via Salaria. Once on the main road, I got on to the bicycle and pedalled away slowly in the direction of Rome.

THE NOSE

WE went and sat down on a seat in the Piazza della Libertà, and Silvano showed me the newspaper. In it was the announcement of the death of this important figure, running across two columns; and it went on to say that the funeral would take place next morning and that the body of the dead man would lie in state all that day in his own house: there would be a book at the entrance-door

in which visitors might sign their names. Underneath, in smaller type, was an account of everything the dead man had done during his lifetime; but Silvano, just when I began to get interested, took the paper out of my hand, saying that it was of no importance. At that moment an expensive car went past, and a scantily clad girl threw a half-smoked cigarette out of the window. Silvano went and picked up the stump, and then, coming back to the seat, said the important thing was the ring which the dead man had on his finger. It was a historic ring, of great value, with an antique engraved emerald in it. This ring had been described to him by one of the undertaker's men, a friend of his, who had helped to lay out the corpse. It had been given to the dead man by a king, and he had requested that he might be buried with the ring on his finger. Silvano concluded by saying that the dead man had lived alone with one servant, and she, almost certainly, would not be there that night, because she would be too much afraid: this also had been told him by the undertaker.

I did not say anything while he went on giving me information about the house, the street, and the whereabouts of the apartment. I was busy weighing the pros and cons of the matter. On the one hand there was the exceptional chance of getting possession of the ring; on the other, the fact that Silvano was one of the most luckless creatures I knew. Adversity was written on his brow; and fortune never smiled upon him but to set him a trap and plunge him headlong into deeper adversity than ever. By his nose, especially, you could see that he was doomed to bad luck—a nose like the clapper of a bell, crooked, livid, with a lump at the end surmounted by an ugly brown mole. It was a nose that made you feel depressed, even to look at it: imagine what it must have been like to wear it! I myself am poor, of course, and I am badly dressed, and in times of low water I may even look like a tramp; but the stink of abject misery, of public doss-houses and convent soup, which Silvano bore about with him, that I have never known. I have never picked up cigarette-stumps thrown out of cars. I thought of all these things while he was speaking, and he, as if he had felt me looking at his nose, began scratching it and then actually rubbing the inside of the nostril with one finger. Making up my mind

all at once, I said to him: "Thank you for thinking of me . . . but it's not possible."

"Why?"

"Because two and two don't make five."

I saw his face go pale, and he bent his head. And then —would you believe it?—he began to cry. "You see how unlucky I am," he whimpered. "Just the one time I get a good opportunity, I can't take advantage of it."

"Go and do the job yourself," I replied. "You won't have to share with anyone and you'll be rich."

"I haven't the courage," he admitted, still weeping; "I'm frightened of dead people. . . . You're not frightened of anything, and I thought . . ."

I cut him short by rising to my feet, telling him that in that case the dead man must keep his ring; and I went away. It was the day of the August public holiday, and I spent it going from seat to seat in the various public gardens. There was no one anywhere: nothing but dust, bits of waste paper, and that look of summer in the middle of a city which is as melancholy as a cast-off garment. And so, as I lounged from one seat to another, I grew more depressed than I can say: holidays have to be celebrated, and anyone who does not celebrate them feels he ought to be doing so and becomes dispirited. But I knew that for me the only way to celebrate the holiday was by carrying off the dead man's ring; and I realized that, having refused my help to Silvano, I should be doing the dirty on him if I made use of the information he had given me. In the end, however, depression was stronger than scruple; and I came to a decision. To be quite truthful, I did for a moment think of advising Silvano that I had changed my mind; but I found I did not know his address. And so poor Silvano was unlucky even in this: he had fallen in with the only honest man in the piazza and yet had gained no benefit by it.

I went home to the little room that was sub-let to me by an old marble-cutter, and took out my implements from their hiding-place: a large ring upon which hung a great many keys of different sizes and tools of every kind; a long nail with a curved point, an invention of my own; a crowbar; and a steel file. I also took half a loaf of bread and put it in my pocket. It was now evening; and I took a tram to the address that Silvano had given me.

I found the house without difficulty, in the neighbourhood of the Viale Parioli. It did not look to me a very expensive kind of house, and I felt rather disappointed: I had imagined an important person like that in the richest possible of dwellings. This was a simple, though modern, house, with a red brick front and white balconies shaped like soap-dishes. I had calculated that at this time of day the porter would be at his supper, and indeed I went in without being seen and went straight to Flat no. 3, which was that of the dead man. Since the dead man was alone in the flat, the door was not bolted but merely closed, with an ordinary spring lock. Very rapidly, but without fumbling, I tried various keys. They say that these modern locks each have a different key, but this is not true: there must be about twenty types at the most. Moreover, locks are like women: the right key, like the right approach, is to be found not by intellect but by intuition. None of my keys, it is true, was the right one; but, after I had tried a dozen of them, I knew exactly which were the superfluous teeth and what filing had to be done. I knew; let us say rather that I *felt*, as it were, by sympathy. The eye of a thief is like that of a surgeon: it knows, at a glance, whether it is right or wrong by the smallest fraction of an inch.

Having formed an idea of the key required, I went up, in a leisurely way, to the flat roof. To reach it, there was a small door of rough wood, with a lock of the old type. I thrust the curved nail into it, caught the curl of the spring with the point, twisted it, and the door opened. I left it ajar and went out on to the roof. It was one of those modern flat roofs like a box without a lid—bare and clean and empty, with no piled-up garden furniture behind which to hide, no dormer-windows, no communication with other roofs or terraces, in case one might have to run away. It was brightly lit up by the moonlight, and looked like a ballroom. I found a dark corner, however, behind a chimney-stack; there I squatted down, took out my file and started making my key. I knew, by the feel of it, how much had to be filed away; in any case at present it was mainly a question of rough-hewing: the final touch of the file would be given later on. When it seemed to me that I had made a key that would fit, I lay down, ate my piece of bread and smoked a cigarette. I had still at least

four hours to wait. I threw away the stump of the cigarette, curled up and quickly went off to sleep.

I awoke exactly four hours later and knew that my sleep had done me good. I went back to the staircase with what I felt to be the tranquillity of an employee going to his office: I was calm, with no feeling of nervousness, cool, clear-headed. I went very slowly down to Flat no. 3, and there tried my key. I had not been mistaken: it fitted almost perfectly; all I had to do was to give it a slight touch with the file and then it turned, and the door opened, sweet as honey.

The flat was a very modest one, as I saw from the first glance—one of those flats of four rooms and a kitchen, unpretentiously furnished, which have no interest for a thief. And yet he had been an important person: the newspaper said that quite clearly. From the front door, I went along a passage: there was a door open, through which came a glimmer of light that did not seem to come from a lamp. It was the moonlight, I discovered, falling obliquely into the room through a window opening on to the garden. Except near the window, the room was in darkness; so I took out an electric torch and started to explore it. The first thing I saw was shelf after shelf of books, then a massive carved table with lion's claw feet, and then—the flowers. There were quantities of them, of every kind, particularly roses, carnations and gladioli. Then, all of a sudden, amongst the flowers, I caught sight of the dead man's face. His beard, moustache and hair were white and smooth as silk; his face was plump and pink; his eyelids, almost transparent, were lowered; he was a man of about seventy, stout, imposing, prosperous, aristocratic. A corpse worthy of respect, a distinguished-looking corpse. Slowly I moved the torch and saw that he was dressed in a black frock-coat, with a red-and-yellow ribbon across his white shirt-front and a white tie carefully tied beneath his pointed, silvery beard. Then the light fell on his hands as they lay crossed on his chest, pink and clean and slightly freckled, with well-cared-for nails. The ring was at once visible, the green of the emerald catching the light, on the short, rather swollen finger. I took the torch in my left hand, leant forward and, taking hold of the ring between two fingers, began twisting and pulling at it. It did not come, so I gave a more vigorous tug—and there it was

in my hand. It seemed to me, however, that the force of the tug had in some way disarranged the corpse, so I raised the lamp and indeed the dead man now had his mouth open and you could clearly see, underneath his walrus moustache, a number of gold teeth. At that same moment a low whistle made me jump. I turned instantly and there, in the window, in fact on the window-sill—a comic sight—I saw the face of Silvano. Paler than the corpse itself, he was staring straight at me. In a low voice he said: "Ah, so you've come."

It all happened in an instant; and in that instant I had made up my mind to lie to him. I answered, quite calmly: "Yes, I've come . . . but the ring isn't there." He made an ugly grimace and whispered, in a strangled voice: "That's impossible." "Come and look for yourself," I replied. With some difficulty he pulled himself up by his hands till he was sitting on the window-sill; then he turned and let himself down on to his feet, inside the room. Without a word I threw the ray of the torch on to the dead man's bare hands. He said at once, trembling all over: "You've taken the ring . . . I can see the hands have been moved." "Don't be a fool." "Yes, you've got it . . . you thief!" "Be careful what you say—" To this he made no answer but rushed at me, trying to catch hold of me by the trouser pocket—which was where, in fact, I had the ring. I took a step back in the darkness, saying: "Look out, we shall be discovered." But evidently he had quite lost his head, for he threw himself at me a second time. Now I had noticed, when I came in, that there was a door behind the table, which I imagined led through into the entrance-hall. I therefore circled round the table, while he, groping, advanced towards me with his hands out; then I quickly opened this door and went in. Not so quickly, however, but that he was able to see, by the light of my torch, that it was merely the door of a cupboard, with no other way out. I heard the key turn in the lock as I twisted round amongst a number of hats and coats hanging on hooks, and then I heard him say in a loud voice: "Give me that ring; otherwise I'll leave you inside there." I was beside myself with rage now—on account, also, of the heat and stuffiness inside that cubby-hole—and I answered that I would not give him the ring. He went away, then, from the door, and I heard him turn on a light and move about

the room. I thought he must be looking for some other object, to make up for his loss of the ring, and I was not mistaken. All of a sudden there was a shrill scream and a cry: "He's biting me!" Then there was the sound of footsteps, of voices in the garden, voices inside the house, doors being banged, people calling. Finally the cupboard door was thrown open; the room was all lit up; people were holding Silvano by the arms, and there, in front of me, stood the expected policemen.

Afterwards, I was able to reconstruct what had happened. The foolish and unfortunate Silvano, wishing at all costs to retrieve his loss, had put his fingers into the dead man's mouth with the idea of pulling out his gold teeth. Just as if they could be plucked like flowers, without the need of proper dentist's forceps! The jerk had caused the mouth of the corpse to close, and Silvano had screamed in terror. All this, however, I thought of later, at the police station. At the moment all I did was to look at Silvano and shake my head in concentrated rage. With a nose like his there was nothing to be done; the fault was entirely on my side, for not having realized that before.